Nabokov in Conversation

A Philosophico-Critical Exploration of the Moral Dimension of His American Works

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. The Writing on the Walls of Our Cage

For more than a while now, moral philosophy has sailed down quietly shallowing waters. Questions about the universal validity of our moral vocabularies, doubts about the scope and reach of our moral systems have become – especially after the advent of Nietzsche and the circuitous undulations of postmodernism in the long wake of his works – more tenacious, more probing, and ever more complex to deal with. The position of philosophical ethics[1] in contemporary society seems, at times, precarious; its traditional concepts and notions, often, like fish out of water.

Some philosophers have even suggested we'd be better off if we stopped talking about ethics altogether. Ludwig Wittgenstein, for example, famously asserted that "it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics," and added, with his usual composedness that "[i]t is clear that ethics cannot be put into words."[2] The early Wittgenstein thought of ethics as "transcendental,"[3] and thus unsuitable for clear philosophical discussion.[4] Ethical problems would be exactly the sort of problems that arise "[…] when language *goes on holiday.*"[5] At the same time, Wittgenstein stresses elsewhere, in a text transmitted to us under the title of *A Lecture on Ethics,* that he is not out to deride or devaluate those philosophers before him who have deigned to engage themselves in philosophical ethics:

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[1] A note on terminology: throughout this thesis, I will use the terms "ethics" and "moral philosophy" interchangeably to refer to the philosophical discipline traditionally dealing with both practical and theoretical questions concerning human morality. The words "morals" and "morality" will be used to designate both the subject matter of this discipline and what could be conceived of as its practical counterpart, which can be anything ranging from certain rules of conduct and/or thoughts about those rules of conduct, to general and/or specific thoughts on how human lives should be lived and/or to what end they should be lived.

[2] Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (transl. F. Ramsey and C. K. Ogden). Ontario: Broadview Editions, 2014, p. 115 (propositions 6.42, and 6.421). For the original text in German, see: Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Schriften I*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1960, p. 80.

[3] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 6.421.

[4] Given the generality of this latter remark, it may justifiably be asked if in the case of the later Wittgenstein, philosophy itself is in fact still suitable for philosophical discussion.

[5] "[...] wenn die Sprache *feiert*." Cf. Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophische Untersuchungen/Philosophical Investigations* (transl. Anscombe, Hacker, and Schulte). Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009 (revised 4th edition), p. 23 *(*aphorism 38).

> My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it.[6]

But although Wittgenstein carefully mitigates the conclusion of his lecture on ethics in the last phrase of the essay, we cannot help but notice that, beyond respectful decorum, some harsh conclusions are drawn here: ethics "can be no science," and the moral philosopher cannot hope to "add to our knowledge in any sense." More in general, and worse perhaps, we cannot hope to gather any knowledge *at all* about questions that seemed of central importance: about the "ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable." We'd simply be hitting our heads against the walls of our cages, and this, Wittgenstein specifies, is "absolutely hopeless."

Wittgenstein paints a rather bleak picture for those willing to continue to do ethical philosophy in a traditional manner. His cautionary skepticism seems to preclude any attempt we might be tempted to make at picking up some of the oldest questions of moral philosophy: "How should a human life be lived?" "What is the Good?" "What is Evil?" "What constitutes human happiness?" "Why is there suffering?" "What should we aim for in life and what should we strive after?" "How to deal with ourselves and others?"

One solution, one that Wittgenstein's critical attitude still seems to allow for and one that has been taken up both by professional philosophers and commonsense thought, is to argue that even though universal, ultimate, and absolute answers to these sorts of questions cannot be given, this does not mean that personal, temporary, and relative answers may not still be satisfactorily provided. Instead of asking: "what's good for *us*, *ultimately?*" one should simply ask: "what's good for *me, right now?*" – the assumption being that it will be much easier or in any case more practically viable to answer the latter question than the former. But this seems too simple, or at least too short-sighted an approach. I can keep giving simple direct answers to the question "what is good for me

[6] Wittgenstein, Ludwig. "A Lecture on Ethics." In: *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 74, no. 1, 1965, p. 12.

right now?" but at some point, as a conscious, thinking, reflective human being, I must be confronted by the question: "is what is good for me right now, good for me in the long run?" And from that point, I'll start sliding down (or up) on a scale that must eventually bring me around to the same collisional questions I sought to evade earlier: once I allow for a difference between what is *good for me now,* and *what is good for me in the long run,* I will need to start appealing to more general criteria in case the two are in disaccord. And these general criteria, if I effectively want to come up with them, will force me to ask precisely the sort of question I tried to avoid, namely *what is good for me, as a human being, in general.* Thus this scenario would still have us hopelessly running against the walls of our cage – only a bit later than we would if we came to ask the "big" questions right away.

If, as Wittgenstein asserts, moral philosophy cannot hope to answer these questions, if ethics, as he says, can never hope to provide the sort of *knowledge* that would vie with what has become the golden standard for knowledge in our time – i.e., scientific knowledge – then it may reasonably be asked: what hope is there still left for ethics? If science chooses to steer clear from it, if common sense deems it does not need it – is there anyone left at all for the moral philosopher to talk to, besides or beyond the callous walls of his cage?

And yet – are things really that hopeless for moral philosophy? Caged we may be, but even if we are, are we not, then, as a fictional poem written by a fictional poet invented by a real author has it, "most artistically caged"?[7] And if artistically caged we are, could there not be a certain merit in probing the contours of our cages? If "running into" the walls

[7] *Pale Fire*, p. 460. When referring to Nabokov's works, only title and page number(s) will be provided throughout the text. In the case of his American novels, all page numbers refer to the edition published by *The Library of America*, edited by Brian Boyd. The one exception is *Lolita*, for which I will rely upon the extensively annotated edition by Alfred Appel, Jr. Complete references for both these and all other works can be found in the bibliography at the end. It should also be noted that I am using the expression "American novels" here and elsewhere in this thesis (most notably in its subtitle) to refer to all of the novels Nabokov wrote in the period ranging from 1938 to 1974, from *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* to *Look at the Harlequins,* even though the former was written while Nabokov still resided in France, and even though the latter was composed in Montreux, Switzerland. If I have chosen to stick with the epiteth "American" to qualify these novels it is primarily because technically more correct options such as "anglophone novels" or "English-language" seem reserved for a different class of novels altogether in most contemporary academic classifications, and because Nabokov's works are now often seen as part of a collection of books that make up the canon of twentieth-century American literature. As is known to almost all Nabokovians, Nabokov remains a writer who eludes these and other classifications based on national, cultural, and linguistic affiliations. The adjective "American" in combination with "novels," then, is used in a purely practical sense in the present thesis, and should simply be read as shorthand for "those novels originally composed in the English language by Vladimir Nabokov in the period between 1938 and 1974").

of our cage seems quite pointless indeed, we may, perhaps, be forgiven for diligently exploring the pattern on these walls – all that is needed to justify such an "exploration" may be an awareness of the fact that the walls of our cage are not simple blank slabs of concrete, but in fact more like the "painted parchment" the speaker of the poem just cited makes them out to be.[8]

The "real author" behind the doubly fictional poem just cited is Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977), and the present thesis will be concerned with a series of novels he published between 1941, shortly after his arrival in the United States of America, and 1977, the year of his death in Montreux, Switzerland. These novels, all of them written in English, Nabokov's "second" language[9] are (in order of their appearance in the present work) *Bend Sinister, Pnin, Transparent Things, Ada, Lolita, Pale Fire,* and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight,* and they are discussed non-chronologically in a sequence of chapters that do not make a conscious attempt at situating them in any historical or biographical context, nor do my analyses necessarily follow the well-travelled road in Nabokov criticism of "assembling" his novels "according to the manufacturer's direction."[10] Much thorough and valuable critical work has been produced along these lines, and I have not hesitated to draw valuable help and information from it where I deemed it necessary or beneficial. Nor have I ignored material from Nabokov's letters, lectures, and autobiography. But the main concern of the present thesis lies elsewhere: it lies with the exploration of a series of particular philosophical problems (the nature of which remains to be elucidated) that can be discussed in the context of Nabokov's works. The aim has been not only to analyze Nabokov's novels from the perspective of what previous philosophers may have had to say about the sort of moral problems his texts present us with, but to focus equally on what can be taken from Nabokov's works and fed back into the ongoing reflection(s) of philosophy.

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[8] *Pale Fire*, p. 460.

[9] Nabokov was born and raised in and around St. Petersburg, and as such his "maternal" language was Russian. His family being a particularly wealthy and aristocratic one, his education was however cosmopolitan and trilingual (Russian, English, French). He himself recalls and reminds us that he learned how to write in English before being able to do so in Russian, in his autobiographical memoir *Speak, Memory*, and liked to describe himself as "a perfectly normal trilingual child in a family with a large library" (*Strong Opinions*, p. 43). See also: Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour's entry on "Bilingualism" in: *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov* (ed. V. E. Alexandrov). New York: Routledge, 1995, pp. 37-43.

[10] McCarthy, Mary. "Bolt from the Blue: Pale Fire." In: *New Republic*, June 1962, pp. 21-27. Cited in: Page, Norman. *Nabokov: The Critical Heritage*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985, p. 124.

Now, one might justifiably at this point put up a finger and ask: but why involve Nabokov in such a project? What do his very specific fictions have to do with the very general questions asked by moral philosophers? I will try to answer this question by starting out with some very brief remarks concerning the general relationship between literature and moral philosophy as it has been recently conceived of. From there, I will try to make my way to a more specific answer that includes Nabokov and his works.

1.2. Ethics and Literature

Socrates is said to have spent some of the final hours of his life turning into verse Aesop's fables. Awaiting death after his conviction, it appears he was worried that a recurring dream he'd been having all his life, instructing him to "cultivate and make music," conveyed more than just a symbolic exhortation to pursue the study of philosophy (thought to be "the noblest and best of music").[11] Like the poet Evenus in the dialogue, we might wonder *what* it was that sparked this sudden interest in music and fabulation in Socrates' mind. Socrates himself claims to have turned to Aesop's fables simply because they were the first thing he came upon.[12] Whatever Socrates' exact intentions and concerns were, the occasion seems to present a very early instance in the history of Western philosophy where a concrete link is established between the domain of philosophy and that of literature. Also, the passage may contain an important revelation, for if Socrates was indeed as familiar with Aesop's fables as he claimed to be,[13] then we may justifiably wonder how this familiarity reflects upon that which follows: the discussion concerning morality in the remainder of *Phaedo.* Is there anything Socrates could have learned from these fables that may have informed or guided his philosophical thoughts? Would he, if pressed a little further by his friend Cebes, have had anything to say upon the relation between his familiarity with Aesop and his reflections on moral philosophy? Or even more in general, on the relation between literature and ethics?

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[11] Plato. *Phaedo*, 60E. Cited from: *The Dialogues of Plato, translated into English with Analyses and Introductions by B. Jowett*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1892 (3rd revised edition), pp. 198-199.
[12] *Ibid.*
[13] "[…] I took some fables of Aesop, which I had ready at hand and which I knew […]." *Ibid.*

These are questions I cannot and would not be able to elaborate on here: they are best left to the philosophers of history and the writers of intellectual history. After Socrates, however, there have been innumerable contributors to the course of intellectual history who have at some point entertained or defended a belief in the intricate relationship between literature and moral philosophy. More often than not, these contributors have even come to the conclusion that works of literature, besides constituting a potential source of pleasure, may even contain or convey to us a sort of knowledge that helps us to develop our capacity for moral reflection and/or informed moral action. Writers, from Montaigne to Tolstoy, and critics, from Sainte-Beuve to Martha Nussbaum, have formulated thoughts and theories attempting to prove why and explain how reading works of literature can contribute to our improvement as moral human beings.

Nussbaum, a philosopher who enjoys much popularity among present-day critics of literature, goes as far as describing one of Henry James's novels (*The Golden Bowl)* as a "major or irreplaceable work of moral philosophy, whose place could not be fully filled by texts which we are accustomed to call philosophical," and asserts that it "explore[s]… significant aspects of human moral experience."[14] Works of literature, Nussbaum seems to argue, not only have an important contribution to make to discussions concerning morality and ethics; they offer contributions that could not be made by more traditional "styles" of philosophizing, and as such, serve (or should be made to serve) as vital elements in our moral education as human beings.[15]

Such an argument, which places some of the great works of Western literary history on a par with or maybe even above more traditional philosophical treatises on the subject of morality, seems to be most welcome to someone who is at the point of committing himself to a long thesis on the subject of literature and ethics. We could delve into the mechanics of Nussbaum's argument a little deeper, expand its scope to include Nabokov's works into the domain of novels that are potentially suitable for our moral education or perhaps even for our moral improvement, and promptly set out to prove through a careful

[14] Nussbaum, Martha C. *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 138.

[15] Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, pp. 138-139. Cf. also her article "Exactly and Responsibly: A Defense of Ethical Criticism." In: *Philosophy and Literature,* vol. 22, 1998, p. 347, and pp. 358-359. Here, Nussbaum vehemently argues against a view called "aestheticism" (which, simply put, claims that there can be no relation whatsoever between a work of art and claims of moral value).

analysis of them that they can, indeed, be made to serve this purpose. For could it not be shown that in his works, too, certain moral problems are discussed in a way that outphilosophizes philosophy, and that to incorporate these works into the larger corpus of moral philosophy, would entail the enrichment of both the domains of moral philosophy and that of literary criticism? Such an approach does not seem impossible and would probably have its merits. It would however, tend to bring up some very thorny and hard-to-solve methodical problems.

One of these problems concerns the *kind* of relation between literature and morality a critic or philosopher arguing along the lines of Nussbaum's ethical criticism seems to presuppose. For even if a relation between literature and morality *is* conclusively established, it still remains to be proven that this relation is in fact of a beneficent nature, as many contemporary critics and philosophers in Nussbaum's wake tend to silently assume. The great number of legal cases made on moral grounds *against* literary works (and their authors) shows that the relation between fiction and morality is not always necessarily a univocally positive one.[16] One is reminded of Rousseau's famous letter to D'Alembert, in which he vehemently explains to his one-time friend that the works of Molière, entertaining though they may be, pose a serious threat to the morals of the people.[17]

Of course, these historical counterarguments don't necessarily imply that there is anything wrong with Nussbaum's defense of ethical criticism– but they do point to what may be conceived of as a potential blind spot. The fact that a nineteenth-century judge was morally appalled by *Madame Bovary*, or that Rousseau was worried about the pernicious moral influence of hundred-year-old comedies does not mean that Flaubert and Molière actually wrote texts that are morally reprehensible or liable to corrupt our morals. However, what they do show, is that we cannot simply *assume* or *presuppose* that literature

[16] For a discussion of a number of the most popular of these cases, see: Ladenson, Elisabeth. *Dirt for Art's Sake: Books on Trial from Madame Bovary to Lolita*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007.

[17] See: Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Lettre à D'Alembert*. In: *Œuvres complètes V, Écrits sur la musique, la langue et le théâtre*. Paris: Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), 1995, pp. 31-32. Rousseau writes: "On convient et on le sentira chaque jour davantage, que Molière est le plus parfait Auteur comique dont les ouvrages nous soient connus ; mais qui peut disconvenir aussi que le Théâtre de ce même Molière, des talents duquel je suis plus l'admirateur que personne, ne soit une école de vices et de mauvaises mœurs, plus dangereuse que les livres mêmes où l'on fait profession de les enseigner."

always simply presents us with the sort of ethical complexity philosophical analysis is bound to extricate from it, or with the moral education that is supposed to follow. I repeat that such a statement may strike one as somewhat naive; but it should also be stressed again that for all its apparent naïveté, this aspect of the complexity of the relation between literature and morality is one that is often forgotten to be taken into account, as we will also have occasion to see further on in the present thesis.

For closely connected to this problematic is another "problem" anent the relation between literature and morality. If the problem just discussed mainly concerned the *kind* of relation assumed, the second one concerns the assumption that there *is* such a relation *at all.* Moral philosophy, in the broad definition employed by Nussbaum and many others, is conceived to be about the question how we should live our lives. Now, if this is the question it is concerned with, an obvious problem arises for the critic who wishes to draw a relation between works of literature and moral education. Simply put: what does reading a book have to do with living a life? For might it not be argued that when I'm reading a work of fiction, the one thing I'm in fact *not* doing, is living my life? Whilst following the peregrinations of a literary persona, I am, at least for the time being, liberated from the long list of practical decisions and questions relating to my own life. Such "escapist" thinking would in fact lead us to believe that there is a major gap between the world of literature, and the world of our daily practical lives, a gap which seems difficult to close; in fact, the sort of gap which for all those non-philosophical and non-professional readers may constitute one of the main powers of attraction of a work of literature: it allows them spend some time away from both the world and themselves.

I'm not sure if the reader can really be said to be "away from him- or herself" while engaging in reading a work of literature. It would be quite difficult to determine the precise ontological status of this "being-away-from-oneself," not to mention the metaphysical consequences of the possibility of such a state. A whole new ontology would need to be devised just to deal with the intricacies of human beings in such states. But the fact that many people conceive of their experience of reading a book in these or similar terms, whatever the ontological validity of this experience, does point to an important insight: there seems to be a difference between the way we experience the life lived out there in the

world, and the way we experience it while caught up inside the world of the work of literature.

So perhaps we could say that "lived life," as it is lived in the communal world, "out there", always already takes place within the ethos of morality, whereas the fictional experience offers a different sort of ethos, which is certainly not "amoral," as pure aesthetes or radical escapists would have it, but rather, "plurimoral." That is to say, the work of fiction offers an ethos where multiple moral possibilities are effectively allowed to compete. The story never being about me, at least not involving my direct participation in it as a moral agent, I am entering, as a reader, into a sphere where my decisions do not bear directly upon my own life. In the work of fiction, I can shed, if not my morality, at least my "interestedness." Nothing that goes on there is *really* about me. Of course, I am not completely disengaged from what is going on in the work of fiction while I am reading it – passages from a novel or even whole stories may still *concern* me; but they concern me differently, never directly, only indirectly. The "I" itself is never involved here; "I" am not the one who is at stake. The self does not have to be put at stake in the experience of reading because I can lift myself out of the moral equation at any point, by simply recognizing and giving myself over to the otherness of the persons and events of the story. It is exactly this added layer of disinterestedness though, that makes up an important part of the interest of the experience of reading to moral philosophy.

But here it may be opposed: do we, in that case, really need works of literature for this? If this is the sort of disinterested plurivocal atmosphere we are after, could we not just stick to philosophy? For did we not already have such a thing as "thought experiments" in the domain of philosophy? And aren't these more advantageous anyway, offering a clear-cut and transparent atmosphere that is easier to analyze and to deal with? In other words: what could reading a novel offer us that a moral thought experiment cannot? (And is not the "moral content" of a novel eventually reduced to or transposed in the form of such a moral thought experiment anyway?)

The main difference, I propose, is again to be found in the role of the self. A novel has been written by someone else, about someone else, and however often I read it, I can never fully make its style and story mine. The thought experiment on the other hand asks exactly the opposite: it wants me to place myself in this position, that situation, and consequently

demands *my* decision. How would I react to this, what would I do if someone did that, etc.? The novel proceeds in the exact opposite direction: its story never fully concerns me, and any judgments that may arise will never have the force of finality because the agent that would finalize this judgment (the self) remains to an important extent outside of the moral equation of the story. There is a distance between me and any protagonist that will not be bridged. I cannot morally *interact* with the protagonist of the story because we are both actors in a different ethos. This does not mean that I am unable to identify with this or that character, or that there are no characters who resemble me to a greater or lesser extent. It just means that I will never be able to effectively imagine myself *as this character*. To some extent I will always remain an onlooker. I can approach the "I" of the story, get infinitely close to him, but between me and the "I" of the story lies a distance that will not let itself be bridged completely. One of the essential characteristics of the great work of literature is that it lures its readers constantly closer to its characters while always subtly keeping them at bay. This is not to say that the traditional notion of "empathy" with characters from a story is wholly fallacious. I am not arguing there can be no special moments of recognition, no intensified moments of shared feelings, no empathic bond, between the reader of a book and its characters – I am simply arguing that such a bond will never completely close the gap between the reader and the fiction. Again: there is a qualitative distance between the two worlds here that causes my moral involvement to be differently determined altogether.

Consequently, the thought that novels offer us a more "personal," more "human" description of moral quandaries than formal philosophical literature, thus allowing us, through a process of identification, to widen our moral perspective on the world, and possibly to emendate our moral behavior, seems first and foremost to amount to a rather sophisticated form of wishful thinking. If moral improvement or the gaining of ethical knowledge were really that simple an affair, the existence of a long tradition of cautionary tales would not make any sense at all. Recall, for example, one of the most famous scenes of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The Arch-Angel Raphael has just related the story of Lucifer's expulsion from heaven, and warns Adam that he should be particularly vigilant, for he will shortly run the risk of being tempted by Lucifer:

> […] But listen not to his temptations, warn

> Thy weaker; let it profit thee to have heard
> By terrible example the reward
> Of disobedience; firm they might have stood,
> Yet fell; remember, and fear to transgress.[18]

Raphael's message seems clear. A cautionary example has been presented. The "fear to transgress" is successfully induced, and yet – we know how this story ends. Raphael's elaborate cautionary tale and the advice following it will come to naught, and Adam will fall. Think then, of Milton's Adam as a literary reminder to the literary-minded moralist, that in some cases, when it comes to our moral behavior, simply no amount of great literature will prevent us from making the wrong decision. We can "identify" with as many fictional others as we want, but such identification will not take away the risk of making their or our mistakes. There are limits to the extent to which the self can overcome itself which seem completely beyond any relation to what we read or don't read.

To draw an inference from the speculative use of literary texts in discussing traditional problems of moral philosophy seems to me if not impossible, at least undesirable. We may certainly enlarge ourselves and our vision of what it means to be a moral agent living in a world among other moral agents, but to assume that from this enlargement of our stock of moral knowledge we may actually set out to become *better* moral agents in our practical relations with these others, is a thought that can only be described as wishful thinking. A good example of a literary critic who asserts that the process of reading may serve to "strengthen the self," is Harold Bloom. In *How to Read and Why,* Bloom defends the potencies of literature for self-improvement whilst at the same time steering clear from any attempt at translating such personal improvement into something that may serve a more general and public moral purpose:

> The pleasures of reading indeed are selfish rather than social. You cannot directly improve anyone else's life by reading better or more deeply. I remain deeply skeptical of the traditional social hope

[18] Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. Book VI, lines 908-912. Ovid's Medea formulates this thought even more succinctly, when she laments: "I see and approve the better; I follow the worse." (*Metamorphoses*. Book VII, line 20).

> that care for others may be stimulated by the growth of individual imagination, and I am wary of any arguments whatsoever that connect the pleasure of solitary reading to the public good.[19]

To set out to prove that a work of literature is able to contribute to our moral education, and to show in what way it could do this, in the end often simply means to lay down a set of moral principles, and to seek to confirm or refute them by means of a description of characters, events, or courses of events in a novel. I do not think such an approach is necessarily wrong, or that its results are always devoid of value – but I do believe that neither literature nor moral philosophy comes out of such comparative exercises unharmed. For either the literary text is reductively explained in terms of moral vocabulary, or the moral philosopher gets carried away by the concreteness of the artistic vocabulary of the novel and loses sight of the aim of moral philosophy, which is to come up with truths, vocabularies, or assertions that are somehow of a more general nature than the highly particularized stories we find in works of literature.

It would be rash however, to deduce from this objection that the literary work is of no moral value at all to both ethicists and general readers seeking moral improvement. On the contrary, I believe with Martha Nussbaum that we can still put literature to moral-philosophical use, and even believe the relation can be made to work in the other direction as well, i.e., that we can put moral philosophy to literary use. This "use," I would only argue, should be restricted to a wholly speculative domain.

We do not have to completely abandon Nussbaum's version of ethical criticism. If we take another look at Nussbaum's theory, we should find that *part* of it can be made to deal and possibly even fruitfully engage with the complexities discussed above. Nussbaum's view can be said to consist in two different main components.[20] The first one is that literature offers us a form of "moral education," the second that great works of literature can be conceived of as attempts to answer the same question as traditional moral philosophy, i.e., "how should we live?"[21] Now the first "tenet" of Nussbaum's theory is the one that I think would eventually run into the sort of difficulties that have just been

[19] Bloom, Harold. *How to Read and Why*. London: Fourth Estate, 2000, p. 22.
[20] Cf. Hanel, K., and L. Jansen. "Reading for the Good Life?" In: *Martha C. Nussbaum: Ethics and Political Philosophy* (ed. Angela Kalhoff). Münster: Lit Verlag, 2001, p. 119.
[21] Cf. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

discussed. Against the moralist's view it would have to be opposed that he who asserts that literary works can morally educate us, must also allow for the possibility that they can potentially corrupt us (and in that case, the assertion that literature is valuable to us because it offers potential moral education either loses all general force, or gets stranded into an endless discussion about which books are good for us and which ones aren't – at which point we are only a short shuffle away from certain discussions concerning morality and literature of the late 18th and 19th centuries, which tended to result in a quibbling about censure). Against more moderate interpretations, we can oppose that it remains difficult to convincingly establish a direct relation between the world of fiction and the world of moral praxis.

But if we were to set the second "tenet" of the theory apart from the first, it seems that Nussbaum's assertion that literary works can be conceived of as works of moral philosophy, and as such help us explore problems of moral philosophy more diversely and more fruitfully, is significantly less likely to get entangled in the same weeds. The reason is that this second tenet contains no judgment of practical value. It simply states that certain literary texts may contain a degree of moral complexity in their form, content, or both, that is liable to make them of interest to people dealing with a particular set of problems related to what we have traditionally come to call ethics or moral philosophy. This assertion itself is actually less a moral assertion than a thematic one: it expresses the need for philosophy to look beyond the boundaries of its traditional texts to a different kind of text, namely, the kind we have traditionally come to call literary texts (novels, stories, plays, poems, fairy tales, perhaps essays). What I want to take away from this "second tenet" of Nussbaum's theory, is that although literary texts may not help us to improve our lives or directly teach us anything about morality, they can still offer us something (let us call it, for want of a better word, a sphere) which is of indirect moral interest (i.e.: of interest to those who like to reflect on questions concerning philosophical ethics).

For if literary works provide us with a sphere where our practical interests are to some extent provisionally *eingeklammert*, then they may also provide us with a sphere where the possibilities for speculative thought are enlarged. What makes this sphere interesting, in contradistinction to the sphere of the philosophical thought experiment, is that it retains a level of concreteness that will not be found in the sphere of pure

philosophical thought. Thus the philosopher who reflects on the moral dimension of a particular work of literature will find himself endowed with both the general speculative possibilities of philosophy, and the concreteness of a moral problematic that extends far beyond the very limited concreteness of any philosophical thought experiment.

In that case, however, it will be remarked, a lot, if not all, rides on the specific coloration of this concreteness. Fairy tales could be classified as literary works, but their moral complexity does not necessarily transcend by far that of the average philosophical thought experiment. One-dimensional characters in one-dimensional worlds may make up for interesting moral philosophical discussions, certainly, but they do not offer us anything like the vast moral complexity and the limitless speculative possibilities of a work like *Lolita, Pale Fire,* or *Ada.* Which is why, for my intents and purposes here, I have chosen to stick with Nabokov.

There have been a number of both critics and philosophers who have felt that Vladimir Nabokov's texts in particular had to teach us something about morality and/or moral philosophy in the latter vein. We will meet some of them over the course of the coming chapters. As will be discussed in the relevant chapters, I often agree with these commentators that Nabokov *does have* something to teach us about morality, but as I've been implying throughout the present introduction, I do not necessarily believe that that which he has to teach us can be conceived of in terms of moral education. His novels are certainly no practical self-improvement courses.

Nabokov himself, as we will see in the sequence of chapters devoted to exploring his works, was rather ambiguous about the moral content of his work. Sometimes sporting clear-cut aestheticist views, he would claim for example about his most famous novel *Lolita,* that it had "no moral tow" and that a work of art, as he conceived of it, "exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall call aesthetic bliss."[22] When an interviewer asked him about "your sense of the immorality of the relationship between Humbert Humbert and Lolita," Nabokov replied that "it is not *my* sense of the immorality of the Humbert Humbert – Lolita relationship that is strong; it is Humbert Humbert's sense. *He* cares, I do not. *I* do

[22] *The Annotated Lolita*, pp. 314-315.

not give a damn for public morals, in America or elsewhere."[23] At other times, however, he would insist that "far from being a frivolous firebird, I was a rigid moralist kicking sin, cuffing stupidity, ridiculing the vulgar and cruel […]."[24] Such assertions may seem hard to unite or even outright contradictory, but recent Nabokov scholars have tried to unite what, to keep things in line with the discussion above, we might call the aestheticist and the ethicist streak, respectively, of Nabokov's attitude towards his own works.[25]

Vladimir E. Alexandrov, for example, explains how "Nabokov's occasional expressions of seeming indifference to ethical questions have misled many of his readers in the past, and continue to contribute to his image of being an aloof aesthete."[26] But, he adds further on, with regard to the apparent contradiction of some of Nabokov's more aestheticist remarks, on the one hand, and some of his more ethicist remarks on the other: "Rather than being evidence of Nabokov's inconsistency with regard to ethical questions, these remarks should be taken as mutually supportive."[27] Another critic, Paul D. Morris, expands this thought even further, and states that in Nabokov's case, "[his] adherence to aesthetics leads to an ethical response."[28] Morris defines the relation between this strong "adherence to aesthetics" and the "ethical response" in terms of a heightened sensibility of the beauty of small things and the resurgence of faith or belief in the ultimate goodness of this world.[29]

I think both Morris and Alexandrov are on to something with their synthetic approach of the aestheticist and ethicist streaks in Nabokov's remarks about his own work. But instead of following them in defining this synthesis in religious or otherworldly terms, I want to follow a different lead here, and take the discussion in a different direction, or in fact, back to the direction we were headed in before. So, how do I intend to use Nabokov's

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[23] *Strong Opinions*, p. 93.
[24] *Strong Opinions*, p. 193.
[25] Cf. also note 15 above.
[26] Alexandrov, Vladimir E. *Nabokov's Otherworld*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991, p. 50.
[27] Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworld*, p. 51.
[28] Morris, Paul D. *Vladimir Nabokov: Poetry and the Lyric Voice*. University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 2010, pp. 174-175.
[29] "Nabokov's writing invites the reader to sharpen consciousness, to re-experience the world, to revel in its plasticity and wonder, and finally to allow 'goodness' to become 'a central and tangible part of one's world' through recognition of 'the irrational belief in the goodness of man' which comes of sensual apprehension of the beauty of the world." Morris, p. 174. Cf. also Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature,* p. 373, for the fragment quoted by Morris.

texts to assist me in asking the sort of traditional philosophical questions that I propose to ask over the course of my investigations?

As I have said before, I will not seek to offer here the sort of descriptions of Nabokov's text that intend to make it work *for* or *in defense of* a specific moral theory or thought. Neither do I aim to fully abide by Nabokov's own *caveats* with regard to approaching and analyzing literary texts solely in terms of the aesthetic delight they provoke, at the exclusion of any possibility for moral analysis at all. I am unsure whether Alexandrov's and Morris's attempt at synthesizing Nabokov's aestheticist and ethicist contentions about his works can *effectively* be reunited, but as also remarked before, it is not my aim to establish and work out a series of connections between Nabokov's thoughts and his texts. Rather, I aim to link up his novels, not with his own thoughts on them, but with texts from a philosophical tradition. For that purpose, Alexandrov's and Morris's synthesizing approach seems, in a more general sense, useful. Assuming, along similar lines, but on a different level, that ethicism and aestheticism are not mutually exclusive, I want to argue that aestheticism, both in the case of Nabokov's works, and with regard to works of literature in general, can be conceived of as *providing the basis* for ethicism and a more fruitful moral discussion. It should be stressed here once more that such a contention by no means necessitates a return to the traditional position concerning moral education discussed above. On the contrary: it is precisely *because* the work of art provides us with an aesthetical sphere that is "practically disinterested" that we can turn novels into playgrounds for moral philosophy.

Thus, I do not aim to use Nabokov's texts to test, prove, verify, or debunk specific moral (hypo)theses, and yet wish to go beyond a purely aestheticst approach to his work. But as already said, neither do I wish to abandon the domain of traditional philosophy completely, or to make an attempt to offer the more commonsensical (that is: less formal, without recourse to traditional philosophical jargon) sort of moral descriptions of his works that one often finds in Nabokov criticism of the late 1990s, and early 2000s.[30] These descriptions are valuable, enlightening, and can take us a long way (took *me* a long way) in understanding aspects of Nabokov's works – yet they also leave an important aspect about

[30] Such approaches, particularly those by Brian Boyd and Michael Wood, will be discussed in the chapters below.

the moral dimension of Nabokov's work unsaid (as any single analysis of his works would, of course). To delve deeper into the moral dimension of his texts, one will have to make them *interact* and *converse* with a set of texts that at first glance may seem far removed from them, but that upon closer scrutiny, may prove to be of great conversational interest.

Philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, in a joint effort, warn against criticism that seeks to speak "for," or "in place of," the author. Instead of identifying with, or taking our distance from the author of a text, which can only cause us to take critical stances from whence we are trying to "parler pour," or, "à la place de," they argue, we should rather try to "parler *avec,* écrire *avec"* the authors whose texts we read.[31] They also warn against the sort of criticism that tries to set up a conversation between itself and its studied subject or object: "pas du tout une conversation, mais une conspiration […]."[32] Such conspiratory criticism is not what I aim for. When I say I will seek to have Nabokov's text interact or converse with texts from the moral philosophical tradition, I have in mind a different kind of "conversation." The conversations I will try to set up are not to be dialogues between a critic and the object he or she studies, but rather primarily between two different objects. They place Nabokov in a plurivocal and dialectic relation with philosophers he may or may not have read. Not in order to have Nabokov's texts "corroborate" any of the thoughts or theses these philosophers may have had, but to see in what way his texts may be used in order to explore them from a different perspective, to shed new light upon them, to delve deeper into them, and to develop the complexity and richness of their vocabulary. By means of this approach I hope to add both to traditional discussions concerning philosophical ethics, and to expand the knowledge of the field of Nabokov criticism. Of course, an agent is needed to have Nabokov actively interact with these philosophers, and these philosophers with Nabokov. Texts do not speak for themselves, they only speak through us. Thus, as a critic, I will try to put myself in the middle of these conversations, always heeding not to talk *for* Nabokov or any of the itinerant philosophers we'll meet along the way, but without eschewing, occasionally, to talk *with* them.

[31] Deleuze, Gilles, and Claire Parnet. *Dialogues*. Paris: Flammarion, 1996, p. 66.
[32] *Ibid.*

But does such an approach not simply amount to one more variation on the time-honed tactics of comparative criticism, where instead of comparing literary texts with other literary texts, literary texts are compared with philosophical texts? Perhaps. But let me, by means of a methodology (or rather, *in lieu of it*), elaborate then on how my approach follows in the footsteps of traditional comparative criticism, and how it differs from it.

1.3. In Lieu of a Methodology: Conversationalist Criticism

An insurmountable problem ultimately looms on the horizon of all forms of comparative criticism. This problem has to do with the *absolute* complexity of literary history as it stands out against the necessary *relativity* of the procedures of comparative criticism (relativity in the sense that one text is *related* to another text or set of texts). In a more formal way, we could describe this problem as follows: the complex vastness of literary history, or indeed, the history of thought in general, makes that we can never safely state that a text X (or an idea or stylistic aspect P expressed in a text X) can be reduced to a text Y.

Comparative criticism purports to show how a text in one way or another has origins that are to be found *outside of itself*. It does so by relating this text to another text (or set of texts). This relation was traditionally defined in terms of influence, and later on in terms of intertextuality. But however we decide to define the relationship between two texts or two sets of texts, due to the fact that the tradition in which a text is somehow inscribed (even if it desires to "attack" or "oppose" a/the tradition) is complex in an absolute way, we can never conclude that any purported relationship we will establish is justified. No matter how successfully we have related text X to text Y, we can never exclude the possibility of there being a text Z to which it could be even more successfully related. And this is what keeps comparative criticism going, this is what makes the exercise of comparing and relating texts to one another a potentially endless enterprise, this is what fuels its constant activity, its *Betrieb.*[33] The fact that there will always be a text Z means that

[33] I take this term from Heidegger's essay "The Age of The World Picture" ("Die Zeit des Weltbildes"). See: Heidegger, Martin. *Holzwege*. Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1950, p. 77. And: Heidegger, Martin. *Off The Beaten Track* (transl. Young and Haynes). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 63. Heidegger

the business of the comparative scholar-scientist is structurally inexhaustible – as long as he does not stop to investigate what he is doing. But now that we *have* stopped to investigate, and noticed this problem, how do we solve it?

One critic who stopped to investigate this problem before – albeit for altogether different reasons, and with a different problematic on his hands – is (a younger version of the already mentioned) Harold Bloom. Bloom is mainly a critic of poetry, and at the time he came up with his (ironically very influential) theory concerning comparative criticism and the anxiety of influence, he was almost exclusively concerned with the relationship that could be established between poetic texts and poems, not at all, as we are in this thesis, with the relationship between literary texts and philosophical ones. Nevertheless, his theory of poetics, as set down in *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, has had its repercussions in both the general field of literary criticism, and even in the broader field of philosophical thought.[34]

The main concept around which Bloom's book revolves is what he calls "influence-anxiety." Unsatisfied with previous foundations in the field of comparative criticism, Bloom aims to open up the space of literary criticism by looking at literary history as if it were a place of *agon,* one where "strong poets" compete with one another. This competition is governed by a principle he calls influence-anxiety, which in its turn, operates through six "revisionary ratios."[35] Every new poet (or "ephebe" as Bloom often likes to call her[36]) entering into the realm of literature is, in one way or another, subject to a sentiment of belatedness, to the anxious feeling that everything worth writing has already been written by someone else. To find her own place in the top ranks of literary history, the strong poet

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points out that *Betrieb*, which could be translated as "ongoing or constant activity," is one of the main characteristics of research (*Forschung*) within modern science as it becomes an institutionalized force: "Research does not," he says, "through its methodology, become dispersed into random investigations, so as to lose itself in them. For the character of modern science is determined by a third fundamental occurence: constant activity [*Betrieb*]."

[34] The number of literary critics that have picked up on Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*, either to use his terminology for their own analyses or to criticize, is seemingly endless, and I won't cite any specific studies or authors here. In the case of philosophy, the name of Richard Rorty may be mentioned. Rorty was one of Bloom's early admirers and multiple references to Bloom are to be found in his work. Interestingly, Rorty also does not hesitate to lift Harold Bloom's terminology out of its poetry-specific context and apply it to broader philosophical problems. For one such example of this, see: Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992 (1989), p. 53.

[35] Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 14-15.

[36] Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 10.

cannot ignore her predecessors, and this is what causes her anguish. To overcome her anxiety, she has to go through the six revisionary ratios just mentioned, which Bloom calls *Clinamen* (or poetic misprison), *Tessera, Kenosis, Daemonization, Askesis* and *Apophrades*.[37]

To explain and explore these different stages of revisionism would take us beyond our purposes here. But let it suffice to say that Bloom's literary universe seems rather violent: this is no playground, rather, it is a place of strife and competition. However, in the introduction to the second edition of *The Anxiety of Influence,* (in which Bloom addresses those who he claims have "weakly misread" him), Bloom restates his original intentions, and says about the concept of influence something that sounds a little more generous, and that could be of interest to us: "Influence is a metaphor, one that implicates a matrix of relationships, imagistic, temporal, psychological – all of them ultimately defensive in their nature."[38]

I find in this redescription of the concept of influence as a metaphor for a complex network of relationships a potential starting point for an alternative and more fruitful way of treating the relationship between texts. However, I am not sure if the concrete shape Bloom gives to this treatment is the most fruitful one. I fear he falls for a certain form of reductionism when after the dash, he adds "all of them ultimately defensive." It is this after-the-dash part of the proposition that will finally lead him to formulate such reductive aphorisms as "the meaning of a poem can only be another poem." And it is exactly the element of reductionism that shows in this sort of statement that makes Bloom's concept of influence still vulnerable to the general difficulties of comparative criticism that have been formulated at the beginning of this section.

It must be mentioned that Bloom is himself aware of the possible problems concerning this reductive dimension in his theory of poetry: "It can be objected against this theory that we never read a poet as poet, but only read one poet in another poet, or even into another poet."[39] But, he objects:

[37] Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, pp. 14-15.
[38] Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. xxiii.
[39] *Ibid*.

> we deny that there is, was or ever can be a poet as poet – to a reader. Just as we can never embrace the whole of her or his family romance, so we can never read a poet without reading the whole of his or her family romance as a poet. The issue is reduction and how best to avoid it.[40]

He goes on then, to blame precisely all *other* approaches to poetry (from "Aristotelian" to "structuralist") for reducing poetry to something it is not, or not completely (ideas, images, phonemes).

Does this really save Bloom's machinery of revisionary ratios from the objection that it is reductive? I am afraid it does not. For Bloom's point of departure in every text he analyzes is still that "the meaning of a poem can only be another poem." Even if he is right to assert that we cannot read "a poem as a poem" (i.e., separated from our reading experiences of all other poems we have read) it does not at all follow that the *only* valid analysis of a poem defines one poem in terms of another poem. Wanting to define a poem in terms of another poem, is still wanting to define it in something other than itself, is still reading it primarily in the light of a second text, and eventually relapses into the same logic of reading a text X in terms of a text Y, without being able to ultimately justify our choice for text Y (there is our text Z again, which may reveal itself to be a more justified object of comparison).

To a certain extent, the sort of reduction that consists in reducing the text to "something that it is not" can never be completely avoided. The largest element of restraint in Bloom's theory however, is elsewhere. It is constituted by a form of reduction that has nothing to do with the fact that his approach is a textualist one; rather, it is to be located at the heart of his anxiety-principle itself. For although his anxiety-principle and its revisionary ratios can be said to allow for an infinite variety of different readings of a text, they still only allow for one particular *form* of reading: this terminology can only imagine scenes where one author is in one way or another *indebted* to another.[41] This, in turn, can

[40] Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 94.

[41] Even if an author were to deny this indebtedness, Bloom would still dexterously inveigle him into the realm of influence-anxiety: for denial of influence, in Bloom's argumentation, is precisely one of the shapes the anxiety of influence takes. One is reminded here of Freudian psychology, which has a similar defense mechanism built into its theory. Denying one suffers from a condition, only proves one suffers from it. Denying one is under the spell of influence anxiety is a clear indication of being under its spell.

lead to a certain blindness in comparative criticism that can produce readings of texts that just don't seem very open-minded.

To give an example of what I mean by this, let us take a look at the description Bloom gives of a relation between texts we are to explore later on in this thesis, the relation between Nabokov's *Lolita* and Proust's *Recherche.* After calling Proust Nabokov's "most daunting precursor," Bloom states:

> *Lolita* gives us Marcel as Humbert and Albertine as Lolita, which is to replace a sublime temporal pathos by a parodistic cunning that unfortunately keeps reminding us how much we have lost when we turn from Proust to Nabokov.[42]

This is a perfect example of the sort of reduction Bloom's comparative criticism can lead to. The urge to define a literary text (in this case, *Lolita)* in terms of the text of a predecessor (Proust's *Recherche),* leads to a sort of burial, where Nabokov's text is buried beneath Proust's text. The point here is not that Bloom is necessarily offering an erroneous interpretation of *Lolita* here, but rather that there is something inherent to this *form* of comparative criticism which makes that injustice will always be done to at least one of the texts between which the relation is established. And even though Bloom's interpretation does not have to be necessarily wrong, it does offer a very reductive reading of Nabokov: there are solid grounds to believe, as I will hope to show in my own comparative analysis further on, that Humbert's problems in *Lolita* are much more than just parodies of problems. Bloom however, never even seems to consider the possibility of Lolita or Humbert being original characters in their own right. Bloom's case is extreme, because his disconcern for Nabokov's text in the example above is so obvious. But in a broader sense, I believe that every form of comparative criticism that attempts to analyze a text X in terms of a text Y in such terms, is bound to lapse into a similar form of reductionism somewhere along the road. If such reductionism can ultimately be avoided at all remains to be seen. For now it should have been made clear that to read a text *only* or *exclusively* in the light of another or other texts does not succeed in opening up the text one set out to analyze, but only in closing it off.

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[42] Bloom, Harold. *Novelists and Novels*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 2005, p. 339.

1.3.1. Conversation instead of Agon

Is there a way out of the reductionist predicament that seems to haunt comparative criticism? Ultimately, I do not think there is. The very nature of language makes that the only "meaningful descriptions" we can come up with, are those that define a thing in terms of another thing: i.e., when I claim that "an apple is an apple," I have not given any meaningful information about apples. "An apple is an apple" is what logicians and linguists call a tautological phrase. It is perfectly correct, but it does not provide us with any new information. If I really want to say something about this apple, I would have to alter my statement into something like "an apple is red," or "an apple is tasty."

The same goes for literary texts. If I want to say something meaningful about them, the proposition or set of propositions I offer necessarily has to define the text in something other than the text itself: if I didn't do that, I would just be copying it. But this does not mean that within the manifold possibilities that exist for describing a text we have read some possibilities cannot be of more use than others.

Examples of approaches of lesser use are all those that define the texts of one author in terms of the texts of another specific author. So when Bloom is reading Nabokov's *Lolita* as a reductive form of Proust's *Recherche,* I think he is offering a weak misreading of *Lolita.* Why? Because in his urge to relate one text to another, he forgets about everything that makes the related text (*Lolita)* itself unique. Every attempt to compare one text to another in terms of "X being influenced by Y" suffers from this condition. And this problem cannot be solved because it is logically impossible to do so: to compare a thing to something else necessarily implies defining it in terms of something that it is not.

This does not mean that no fruitful research can be conducted within this field; on the contrary. I am not concerned here with the actual *contents* of the outcome of comparative criticism, but with the *vocabulary* in which this outcome is formed. And I think the problems I've been discussing up till now urge us to do something about that vocabulary. My point is not that people who reason in terms of influence tend to come up with the wrong answers – all I am saying is that there are some serious problems inherent to the vocabulary they are using which might resound negatively in the outcome of their actual analyses, that is to say, which might have them overlook particular elements in

literary texts that are more important than the unsolvable questions of "which author/text has been influenced by which other author/text." And it is important to realize that, once admitted that comparative criticism cannot be sensibly built upon any "true vs. false" or "right vs. wrong" dialectic, it does not make sense to just go on in terms of the old vocabulary; this would amount to self-imposed blindness.

This allows for a shift of interest from (what French academic criticism likes to call) *la question des sources* to a form of questioning that is first of all interested in putting literary texts to some other use, to make them do something else for us in our analyses of them. The latter affirmation does *not* mean we should replace the old form of questioning by the sort of questioning where "anything goes," for I do think a difference can be made between different sorts of uses, and there is one use in particular that I would like to defend here; one that I will eventually call *Besinnung.*

In order to do so, we first have to replace Bloom's image of the relation between texts as the result of an *agon*, by a friendlier one: the image of literary history (in the largest sense of the word) as an ongoing conversation. Portraying the relation between texts as the result of a conversation means to think of the participants in literary history as the participants in a broad and lively conversation. This conversation has no essence, it does not revolve around a center, but branches off in ever so many directions and that which characterizes the conversation first and foremost is its proteanism. Thus, I will try to avoid to determine Nabokov's texts solely or simply in terms of influence or origin. Although I will link them to specific texts by specific philosophers, and although I will suggest possible relationships between Nabokov and these philosophers, I will try to refrain from defining any of his texts exclusively in unilinear terms of influence. Put differently: I will never define a text X completely in terms of a text Y (or the other way around). A genuine exploration of the relationship between X and Y will have to, somehow, move beyond such terms, and have the two actually converse with one another on their own terms. As in the case of everyday conversations in which multiple persons partake, we cannot always say who initially came up with an idea within this conversation.[43] A conversation proceeds in

[43] Conversations are never "initiated" or "started" by one particular person. One can start talking about something, but "one" cannot start a conversation. A conversation is what *happens* when two or more persons start talking about something. Thus we would be wrong to assume that Plato "started" the conversation about

manifold and sometimes mysterious ways, and at its end, more than one participant may believe he or she introduced a certain idea, while actually, he or she was just picking up on a line of idea introduced by someone else. Similarly, there might always be that lonely participant who was not really listening to the people surrounding him, but actually just talking to himself in a corner of the room.

All this, it should be stressed, is not about the actual outcome or contents of criticism; it is only about reshaping the terminology we use to deal with texts. Thus, in the present thesis, I will try to come up with a series of "redescriptions" in order to set up a conversation between some of Nabokov's texts and the tradition of Western philosophy. As in real life, the most fruitful conversations are those where people listen to each other, so I will try to stage the encounter between Nabokov's worlds and the universe of philosophy as much as possible as a conversation where the two are also carefully and patiently made to listen to each other. I want the texts to talk to each other, not to have the voice of one text drown in the noise of another text. Ultimately, the redescriptions referred to above serve no practical purpose, and have no direct moral, no lessons of self-improvement to offer. Their reach is bound by the limits of speculation, and the "conversations" staged here are, in a way, conversations for conversation's sake.

The history of literature can be conceived of in the same terms Rorty used to describe the history of philosophy: "The project of finding new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking."[44] Rorty thought the most fruitful way of conceiving of the history of thought was to conceive of it as "an edifying conversation."[45] The goal of literary criticism would be to serve as overhearers of precisely this conversation, and to offer an interesting view on what is going on inside of it. If this view is interesting enough, it will be overheard by others, and thus taken up into the conversation. This means that the main

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Ideas, that Descartes "initiated" the conversation about the *cogito* and primacy of the intellect, or that the conversation about the concept of enlightenment begun with Kant's famous essay in 1784. The philosophical conversations anent these subjects were only formally begun when *others* reacted and responded to them. The point I'm trying to make is not that it is thus the "one who responds" who initiates the conversation. It is that the "I" cannot start a conversation. But neither can "you". Conversations are bound to always remain within the domain of the other. A conversation is never someone's responsibility, it is always someone else's responsibility. Conversations do not result from (or for that matter belong to) "selves," they are what happens when propositions of two or more selves somehow grow interrelated and start to extend beyond the confines of personal creativity and selfhood.

[44] Rorty, Richard. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980, p. 360.

[45] *Ibid*.

aim in comparative criticism as we are to conceive of it here, is not to define as successfully as possible a text X in terms of a text Y or the other way around, but to try and define how both text X and text Y participate in one and the same ongoing conversation on certain themes and thoughts, ideas and images, and how, beyond the specific "answers" or "images" a text offers, this specifity can be linked to other specificities, and eventually help us to keep coming up with redescriptions of the ongoing flow of thoughts, ideas, images, themes, questions, and answers, that makes up the larger conversation itself.

Good overhearers do not occupy themselves with searching for the origin of a text in any exact place. They have developed a familiarity with the conversation that has grown sufficiently extensive to know that it (the conversation) is too complex to be overseen completely. Rather, they are occupied with lighting up those parts of the conversation they think are of particular interest, and strive to do so in a way that sets them apart from fellow overhearers – for they too do want to add a genuine comment to the conversation, they too want to take part in it in a meaningful way. But everyone wants to be heard, and only those who have something interesting to say (or in the critics' case, *to say in reply*) will be attentively listened to. This means that the critic is ultimately concerned with the same sort of quest as the writer: inventing new ways of speaking about those particularly interesting parts of the conversation in a way she thinks is interesting enough to be overheard by others.

This means an important change of position for the critic busying herself with comparative criticism. First of all it means talking about what she is doing in a more modest way. She is not a seeker or a finder of truths, someone who finally reveals the true origins of a text, or lays bare "the hidden roads that go from poem to poem."[46] The only thing she can ever really hope to do is to take multiple texts and try to set up a conversation between them to see if she can make these texts talk to each other by uniting them in a story of her own. Whether this story is convincing or not will depend not on the number of truths elucidated or the number of "hidden roads" discovered, but on whatever it is this story may have to add to the larger ongoing conversation of human thought and imagination. The goal of the conversationalist critic then, is not necessarily of the order of

[46] Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 96.

truth or scientific knowledge. Conceiving of a literary text as a highly idiosyncratic redescription of a product offering an alternative description of reality or certain elements of reality, she will have to explain what she herself can get out of this redescription, and what she can do with this. She will be, in Rorty's words, the kind of literary critic that "is in it for what [s]he can get out of it, not for the satisfaction of getting something right."[47]

This does not amount in any way to relativism. It just means that the critic will be using texts for a very specific purpose: that of selecting and presenting those parts of the ongoing conversation in literary history that she deems worthwhile, and in terms that, according to her, reveal in what way these parts of the conversation are especially of redescriptive value.

As may have already shone through the terminology used here, the "methodology" presented here owes a lot to Richard Rorty and what has become known as "the new pragmatism" in philosophical circles. We will deal with Rorty's pragmatism from an ethical perspective and in connection to Nabokov later on, but let me provide here two accounts from Rorty's own works that explain what this new pragmatist attitude stands for in general:

1. Pragmatists [...] do not believe that there is a way things really are. So they want to replace the appearance-reality distinction by that between descriptions of the world and of ourselves which are less useful and those which are more useful. When the question 'useful for what?' is pressed, they have nothing to say except 'useful to create a better future'. When they are asked, 'Better by what criterion?', they have no detailed answer, any more than the first mammals could specify in what respects they were better than the dying dinosaurs.[48]

2. Whereas the first kind of philosopher [the platonist philosopher] contrasts "hard scientific fact" with the "subjective" or with "metaphor," the second kind [the pragmatist philosopher] sees science as one more human activity, rather as the place at which human beings encounter a "hard," nonhuman reality. On this view, great scientists invent descriptions of the world which are useful for purposes of predicting and controlling what happens, just as poets and political thinkers invent other descriptions of it for other purposes. But there is no sense in which *any* of these descriptions is an

[47] Rorty, Richard. "Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism" (1981). Reprinted in: *The Rorty Reader*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, p. 131.
[48] Rorty, Richard. "Truth without Correspondence to Reality." In: *Philosophy and Social Hope*. London: Penguin Books, 1999, pp. 27-28.

> accurate representation of the way the world is in itself. These philosophers regard the very idea of such a representation as pointless. […] We need to make a distinction between the claim that the world is out there and the claim that the truth is out there. To say that the world is out there, that it is not our creation, is to say, with common sense, that most things in space and time are the effects of causes which do not include human mental states. To say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations. […] The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own – unaided by the describing activities of human beings – cannot.[49]

Rorty attempts to replace what he calls the old Platonist distinctions (between truth and falsehood, between reality and appearance, between finding and making or creating) with a simple distinction between what is useful to us and what is not. There is an insurmountable gap between the world and the descriptions we can provide of this world: truth is a predicate that we can only attribute to relations between sentences, not to relations between a linguistic description and the world it describes. This means that the range of possible redescriptions of the world is endless. However, that does not entail a form of relativism: this is where the notion of "use" comes in, for some redescriptions of the world have proven to be of more use than others under given circumstances.

For example, this means that Yeats's description of growing old in *Men Improve with the Years*,[50] is not further away from the truth, or objectively less adequate as a description

[49] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-5.

[50] I AM worn out with dreams;
A weather-worn, marble triton
Among the streams;
And all day long I look
Upon this lady's beauty
As though I had found in a book
A pictured beauty,
Pleased to have filled the eyes
Or the discerning ears,
Delighted to be but wise,
For men improve with the years;
And yet, and yet,
Is this my dream, or the truth?
O would that we had met
When I had my burning youth!
But I grow old among dreams,
A weather-worn, marble triton
Among the streams.

of old age than a description of it given by a gerontological account in a medical encyclopedia about the senescence of diploid cells when telomeres reach the Hayflick limit.[51] What we have here are simply two different descriptions of the phenomenon of old age, both serving their respective purposes. A doctor might want to have knowledge of the latter when he wants to give his patient an indication that is as accurate as possible of his life expectancy; the old patient himself might want to prefer instead to know by heart the former as he is trying to make sense of the implications of old age for his position and relation to the world as an older man. The pragmatist point here would be that neither the biological nor the poetic description of old age offers a description that is objectively more valid, or can be said to be closer to the truth than the other – for there simply is no such thing in the world ("out there") as "true old age" or "old age as it really is." There is just an indefinite set of descriptions of old age that are of different use, in different situations. Yeats's description and the doctor's biological description are just two descriptions out of many: and both are arguably useful in some way. To stress once more that this does not amount to a form of relativism, it could be added that on this account it is still possible to argue that there are descriptions of old age that are of no use at all. An incoherent medical analysis, or for that matter, a trite and banal poem, would be arguably quite useless here. And that brings us back to the task of the critic: she is the one whose task it is to make it clear why and in what way some descriptions can be more "useful" (in the non-utilitarian, broad sense of the word) to us than others.

1.3.2. *Besinnung* and *Wissen*

The ultimate goal of the conversationalist critic is to offer what, by borrowing a term from philosopher Martin Heidegger, could be called *Besinnung*.[52] The concept of *Besinnung* is not to be taken as an affirmative concept. To speak of it as the goal of the conversationalist critic does not imply sending criticism in a particular, predetermined direction; on the

[51] I do not know what most of these words mean but I have it upon good authority that there are people who do.

[52] In English translations this term is usually rendered as "reflection." Because this seems to cover the meaning of the term only partly, I have chosen to retain the original German word here. Its more exact meaning should become clear over the course of the present section.

contrary, *Besinnung* as the not-end-but-middle-point of the analysis of literary texts expresses the need for a constant *questioning*, a perennial need for redescription, relocalization and revision of the present vocabularies of a certain age. The possibility of such *Besinnung* at all, is one of the main arguments in defense of our wanting to keep putting literary texts to use at all. Heidegger's pithy formulation of the word reads: "Reflection [*Besinnung*] is the courage to put up for question the truth of one's own presuppositions and the space of one's own goals."[53]

Besinnung, then, is about stopping over to reflect. Not just about finding new ways to continue what we were doing, but about questioning if that which we were doing actually makes any sense. Gathering up the courage to ask ourselves if what we *are* doing is what we *should* be doing, *even* (perhaps especially) when that which we are doing is providing us with great practical results and benefits. The activity of *Besinnung*, thus, is not directed towards a certain form of scientific progress, but incites us to take a whole new stance, to ask different kinds of questions. Instead of finding new ways forward, it incites us to step back and see what other roads there are that could be taken. Heidegger explicitly places such *Besinnung* over against the progress of modernity in general and modern science in particular. But he is not simply saying that we should stop our scientific activities and start "besinning." Most of the time, we will not want to reflect upon what we are doing:

> Such reflection [*Besinnung*] is neither necessary for all nor is it to be accomplished, or even found bearable, by everyone. On the contrary, absence of reflection [*Besinnungslosigkeit*] belongs, to a very great extent, to the particular stages of accomplishing and being constantly active.[54]

Besinnung, for Heidegger, seems to be a thoroughly philosophical activity, the philosophical activity *par excellence*: it is what Heidegger's ideal philosopher (i.e., a philosopher who

[53] Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, *op. cit.,* p. 57. German text: "Besinnung ist der Mut, die Wahrheit der eigenen Voraussetzungen und den Raum der eigenen Ziele zum Fragwürdigsten zu machen." From: Heidegger, *Holzwege*, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

[54] Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, *op. cit.*, p. 73. German text: "Solche Besinnung ist weder für alle notwendig, noch von jedem zu vollziehen oder auch nur zu ertragen. Im Gegenteil: Besinnungslosigkeit gehört weithin zu den bestimmten Stufen des Vollbringens und Betreibens." Heidegger, *Holzwege*, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

thinks according to the principles of the Heideggerian method of philosophizing) does.[55]. For Heidegger, *Besinnung* "finds in Being the utmost resistance, which constrains it to deal seriously with beings as they are drawn into the light of their being."[56] Thus, if taken seriously, *Besinnung* can lead to what Heidegger calls *Wissen*.[57] *Wissen* has nothing to do with scientific knowledge, or even with the metaphysical and epistemological theories of modern philosophy: *Wissen* appears to be the state of being we reach when *Besinnung* is carried out accordingly. It is defined by Heidegger as "in seine Wahrheit verwahren":

> To know [*Wissen*], i.e., to dwell in the realm of one's truth, is something man can only do in a non-calculated fashion, through creative questioning, and by shaping it through the force of genuine *Besinnung*. Reflection [*Besinnung*] transports the man of the future into that "in-between" in which he belongs to being and yet, amidst beings, remains a stranger.[58]

So *Wissen* appears here as the destination of *Besinnung*. A provisional destination, rather than a final one, because as we reach this destination, nothing is realized or finalized – to be in the state of *Wissen* means to "verwahren" in one's "Wahrheit," to dwell in the realm of one's truths, reflecting upon them as potentialities or possibilities instead of as finalized chunks of indelible knowledge. It is this attitude of "in seine Wahrheit verwahren," this floating position, that I take to define the destination of conversationalist criticism. What the conversationalist critic should seek to create is a place where the reader dwells among a series of truths, afloat between texts.

Conversationalist criticism aims at creating a redescription of a text (or texts) that places its reader somewhere in between the commentary and the text, where first and

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[55] However it is also explicitly something upon which poetry touches. (Thus Heidegger will say for example that Hölderlin is very much aware of the intricacies of *Besinnung*.) Cf. Heidegger, *Holzwege*, p. 88 and Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, p.72.

[56] Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, p. 73.

[57] A word whose traditional meaning would lie somewhere in between "knowledge" and "wisdom." A close equivalent can be found in the French noun *savoir*.

[58] Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, p. 72. I have replaced the first sentence of Young and Haynes' translation with a translation of my own on this occasion. Their translation reads: "Man will know the incalculable – that is, safeguard it in its truth – only in its creative questioning and forming from out of the power of genuine reflection." Cf. the German original: "Wissen, d.h. in seine Wahrheit verwahren, wird der Mensch jenes Unberechenbare nur im schöpferischen Fragen und Gestalten aus der Kraft echter Besinnung. Sie versetzt den künftigen Menschen in jenes Zwischen, darin er dem Sein zugehört und doch im Seienden ein Fremdling bleibt." Heidegger, *Holzwege*, p. 88.

foremost the reader is to be brought around to *Besinnung*, and where, if both redescriptions are strong enough (that is to say, if they are of sufficient "use" to the reader), she might be able to emerge, in the words of Wallace Stevens, with a feeling of finding herself "more truly and more strange."[59] More truly, *because* more strange. "Truly," in this sense, does not refer to any Platonist or similarly monolithic notion of truth, but to a state of being torn between truths, in a state of what Heidegger calls *Wissen*, of dwelling in the presence of a multitude of truth-candidates, a multitude of equally tempting redescriptions. Such *Wissen* is only possible if a work of criticism strives to offer a redescription of a literary text or set of texts that is both dependent on it and independent from it. Independent, so as to offer not just a description, but an interesting redescription. Dependent, so as not to make the literary text or texts the critic aims to redescribe disappear altogether in her redescription.

1.3.3. Character Studies

Time to turn then, from the theoretical considerations underlying my approach to the concrete form the analyses of Nabokov's texts below will take. As it will appear, I have chosen to take Nabokov's fictional universes seriously to the point of conceiving of them as self-sufficient worlds, presenting us with real people with real moral problems. The way these characters deal with their problems can provide us with insights concerning the way we are to deal with these problems were we to experience them ourselves. As already said,

[59] Stevens, Wallace. "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon." In: *Collected Poetry and Prose*. New York: Library of America, 1997, p. 51. One might object that to use here the words of Stevens's Hoon, who chants: "I was myself the compass of that sea / I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw / Or heard or felt came not but from myself," appears to be somewhat out of our conversationalist context. It should not be forgotten however, that "mountain-minded Hoon / for whom desire was never that of the waltz / Who found all form and order in solitude," when he returns in *Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz* (*op. cit.*, pp. 100-101), appears to have outgrown this solipsistic mood: "Now, for him, his forms have vanished." "Sudden mobs of men […] sudden clouds of faces and arms […] voices crying without knowing for what" are made to appear by Stevens, and the need for "Some harmonious sceptic [who] will unite these figures of men and their shapes / Will glisten again with motion" is expressed. Thus, I take this second appearance of Hoon as an important addition to Steven's first description of him thirteen years earlier in *Tea at the Palaz of Hoon*: the desire to find oneself "more truly and more strange" persists, but the solipsistic dimension disappears in the recognition that "the shape / For which the voices cry, these, too, may be / Modes of desire, modes of revealing desire." See, for a more elaborated close reading that argues against the image of Stevens's Hoon as a solipsist, and proposes instead to conceive of him as a Whitmanian quester: Bloom, Harold. *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*. Ithaca: Cornell Universty Press, 1980 (1976), pp. 64-67.

I doubt literature can turn us into better people. I am not sure if a closer study of the characters in Nabokov's novels will necessarily provide us with the knowledge that can help us to live better lives. At most, the study of such novels can help us reach the state Heidegger describes as *Wissen*. These moments of *Wissen* can potentially make us turn around or incite us to adopt new ways, but this is of course not always the case. The state of *Wissen* remains undetermined: it does not take us beyond a dwelling among truths.

I will focus upon Nabokov's characters and the way they deal with certain problems that can be conceived of in terms of traditional problems of moral philosophy. A similar probing attention to literary characters and their problems is at least as old as the eighteenth century, when critics such as Maurice Morgann and William Richardson started to study certain characters in Shakespeare as if they were human beings.[60] There is however an important difference between their approach and my own: whereas these accounts were characterized by a high degree of moralizing,[61] I will try to replace moralizing with moral philosophy and ethical reflection – this in accordance with my conviction that the deep moral dimension of a literary work is to be found not in the *solution* of the moral problems it presents, but in a meaningful maintenance of the complexity of these problems.

Finally, the conversationalist approach to literature does not have any fixed terminology to hand to the literary critic who chooses to adhere to it. It only offers the critic a way of thinking about literature that encourages her to use as much or as little terminology in her literary analyses as she thinks best suits the story she wants to tell about it. It should also be mentioned that the analyses offered below are still heavily reliant upon traditional hermeneutic procedures, but with the notable difference that they do not claim to elucidate truths or intend to be of any scientific value. The reader should be warned: the present work offers no contribution whatsoever to the contemporary project that parades under the name of "(the) literary science(s)."[62] Ralph Waldo Emerson writes

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[60] For an overall account of character criticism and its history, see: Vickers, Brian. "The Emergence of Character Criticism: 1774-1800." In: *Shakespeare Survey: An Annual Survey of Shakespearean Study and Production*, vol. 34, 1981, pp. 11ff.

[61] Vickers, *art. cit.*, p. 12.

[62] One might oppose that the conception of comparative criticism presented above lacks any *scientific* method, and that the resulting analyses can only be of an impressionistic nature. I can only answer that I do not believe that a scientific method modeled on those used in the exact sciences suits the purposes I have

somewhere that "Literature is a point outside of our hodiernal circle through which a new one might be described."[63] To create a sphere of such concentricity by having Nabokov's text converse with texts from the philosophical tradition is the ultimate aim of the present work.

1.4. Final Goals and Ultimate Ends

After our "brief," "methodological" excursion in the previous section, and before ending this introduction with a summary description of the concrete contents to come, one important question remains to be answered. For it may still be reasonably asked in what way, more in general, the upcoming analyses of Nabokov's novels are supposed to help us break through the limits set upon us by the skepticism discussed at the outset of this introduction.

Ethical skepticism confronted us with the thought that we cannot hope to come up with ultimate answers to questions concerning the good, evil, and the way we should live our lives. To probe for such answers, to repeat Wittgenstein's words once more, would be like hitting our heads against the walls of our cage. Absolute finality, when it comes to ethical reflection, is thought to be beyond the limits of our philosophical powers of understanding. As indicated however, these words need not discourage us, or at least, not completely. Taking a line from Nabokov's *Pale Fire,* we already hinted at the possibility of overcoming the challenge Wittgenstein poses to the limits of ethical thought, not by seeking to radically break out of our cage, but by conceiving of this cage more "artistically," thus both respecting some of the criticism of his ethical skepticism, but without accepting the implication that this should result in a state of "hopelessness" or despair. All "cagey" imagery aside, we may at this point also factor in our remarks about the Heideggerian notions of *Besinnung* and *Wissen:* for these notions remind us of the fact that "to verwahren" in "Wahrheit," to dwell in the realm of truth, may be more philosophically

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been reserving for literature here. In this, I take to heart Gadamer's assertion that "Das hermeneutische Phänomen ist ursprünglich überhaupt kein Methodenproblem" and that "Es geht in ihm überhaupt nicht in erster Linie um den Aufbau einer gesichterten Erkenntnis, die dem Methodenideal der Wissenschaft genügt." See: Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1972 (1960), p. xxvii.

[63] Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Circles." Cited from: *The Portable Emerson*. New York: Penguin Books, 1987, p. 234.

valuable than any linear pursuit for absolute and final answers. Added to this we may remind ourselves of elements from Rorty's new pragmatist attitude: instead of trying to come up with absolute answers and solutions, we may spend our time much more valuably in a patient attempt to think up and compare redescriptions of philosophical problems.

All this leads us to assume that there *is* an inevitable plurivocity in every answer to the big moral questions, too (e.g., "What is the good?" "How should life be lived?" "How to reach happiness?" "What is the meaning of suffering?" "How should we act?" "Why is there evil?"). To move on from this assumption to a sort of relativism that states that any hope for valuable answers to this sort of question has to be fundamentally misguided, however, would be to draw from the recognition of such plurivocity consequences that do not necessarily follow from it. The fundamental philosophical position underlying many of the chapters that follow, therefore, will be one that states that potential answers to moral questions are to be interpreted as "final," but only in a very specific sense: this does entail that they are "ultimate," or "absolute," or indeed, "final," in the most common sense of the word (such as we used it, for example, in our discussion of Heideggerian *Besinnung* above).

To explain what I mean by that we have to look beyond the Latin etymology of the word "final," at its roots in Ancient Greek. When Aristotle, for example, famously says that "the human good turns out to be activity of the soul in accordance with excellence,"[64] he hastens to add that this activity is to be entertained, not just for a while, but throughout the course of a complete life (*en bio teleio*).[65] The adjective Aristotle uses here ("*teleo*s," or "*teleio(s)*"), and which has been translated as "complete" by Christopher Rowe, stems from the verb "*teleo*," which primarily means "to finish," but in a more literal sense "to round off." This literal sense is in its turn related to the noun "*to telos*," meaning a "circle," but also, in the sense especially philosophers are familiar with, "a goal."

Now with all this in mind, we could think of Aristotle's addition concerning "completeness" in the above statement to be perhaps even more ambiguous than it has already been made out to be.[66] For as the etymology shows here, there seems to be an

[64] Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Oxford University Press: New York, 2002, p. 102 (1098a15).
[65] *Ibid.*
[66] See, for a more traditional interpretation of the inherent ambiguity here, Sarah Broadie's commentary to what Aristotle's use of "complete life" is supposed to mean. She argues Aristotle means to indicate here at

apparent ambiguity on the very level of the word "finality" itself, at least to modern readers, who think of the "final" of something as its end. The final point of a race is a straight line drawn across the tarmac. We think of what is final as the point at the end of a straight line, as the last and concluding part of something, as that which ends all previous continuity or movement. The Greek word "teleios," however, can be said to retain some of the circularity of the original noun "telos" (circle, goal). This flexibility shines through in the verb form of the word ("teleo"), which, when it says that something is completed or finished, states in fact more literally, that it is "rounded off." This roundness, which may easily be overlooked in translation, opens up a possibility for thought, for it suggests that the final point of a line (following the imagery behind the Ancient Greek word) is not necessarily its end, but perhaps rather simply that point on the arc of the circle which links up one end of the semicircle with the beginning of the other.

Translating this thought about finality from spatial terms into non-spatial terms, we could say that the Ancient Greek imagery that seems to lurk at the very center of the word "telos" offers us a way to think about finality without conceiving of it as an end-point. Thus, to get back to the problematic of moral skepticism that concerned us here, the echo of the etymology of finality can be said to provide us with a new opening. It hints (this etymology) at a possibility for thought to think of "final" answers in a way that does not necessarily reduce or inflate them to *last* or *ultimate* answers. Being mindful of the circularity at the heart of finality, we can stop thinking of it in terms of *ultimacy*, and start thinking of it in terms of circularity and *completeness*.

When Aristotle claims that moral excellence (*arête*) can only be determined when measured against the completeness of a human life, I take from this, stretching perhaps to some extent the logic of Aristotle's text, not only as is traditionally assumed,[67] that the matter of morality can only be decided at the *end* of human life, but also: that this matter can only sensibly be decided when we take into account the *telosity* of human activity itself. That is to say, only through the awareness of the fact that when it comes to human activity, the relation between a "means" and its "end" is not like that between the starting point of a

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least two things, i.e., "rational maturity (which requires experience)" and the presence of "abundance of opportunities for […] excellent activities." See: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 278.

[67] Cf. again, Broadie's commentary: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 278.

straight line and its end-point, but on the contrary, that the finality/completeness of human action consists in a circular sequence which has us going around from a means to an end that is *always,* as long as we live, the beginning of another means – only through such an awareness can we hope to be able to provide answers of "final" value to questions concerning ethics and morality. The finality of these answers then, will never be ultimate (circles do not have last- or end-points) but this does not mean that they cannot strive towards a certain degree of completion.

The abstract principle just laid down will have to be completed concretely in the form of actual analyses of ethical questions and problems, and this is what I will try to do over the course of the present thesis, along the conversational lines indicated above. For want of a better word, one could call the general approach to ethical questions here described *kinethical*. This approach does not shun to search for finality in its answers to the "big" traditional questions of moral philosophy, but at the same time recognizes that if this finality is to stand the test of skepticism, it can have no pretense whatsoever to ultimacy, and only consist in a modest stab at completeness. The "kin" points to the singulalarly and circularly provisional form answers to moral question necessarily take on this view: the kinethical approach offers no definite solutions, no ultimate truths. The sort of redescriptions it can come up with do not seek to effectively solve, but rather to keep ethical questions and their answers revolving around one another through a sort of perpetual renewal of the initial wonder that gave rise to these problems and questions in the first place.

The "ethic" in "kinethic," on the other hand, is meant to indicate that far from giving up hope to speak about ethical problems in a constructive way, far from a desire to deconstruct the project of ethics, or skeptically shrug off the claims and questions of ethics altogether, this approach still aims to heed the call of the traditional questions of moral philosophy, and take on the challenge to come up with stimulating and valuable answers to them. Thus the kinethical approach attempts to recognize the limitations put upon us by the Wittgensteinian walls of our cage, without abandoning the hope that we might think of these walls in terms other than a set of prison bars. Against the hope-dashing perlustrations of skepticism, I seek to oppose the buoyancy of conversation and redescription. The distance between the desolation of Wittgenstein's cage to the

umbrageous bleakness of Plato's cave amounts to no more than the interval between an affricate and a fricative. If the following analyses of ethico-philosophical questions in relation to the works of Vladimir Nabokov can help to keep us from descending back into the darkness and confusion of that cave,[68] by bringing back into view the eminent artistry that *gracefully* (magnificently and mercifully) adorns the walls of our cage, the present work will have come a long way towards succeeding in its purpose.

1.5. The Questions Ahead

Which, then, to round off this introduction with a very short summary of the chapters to come, are the concrete moral questions, problems, and quandaries we will seek to address and explore?

In Chapter 2, we will start off with a study of the problematic of suffering in Nabokov's *Bend Sinister* and the way modern dialectical philosophy (from Hegel and Marx to William Desmond and Charles Taylor) has dealt with this problematic. Chapter 3, through an exploration of Nabokov's *Pnin,* will offer an investigation into the problematic of the suffering of others from the perspective of the tradition of pragmatism from William James to Richard Rorty. In connection to this, I try to offer a viable description of the sort of position the suffering subject finds itself in. Chapter 4 clears the ground for a new problematic, and discusses the relation between spatiality and morality by trying to create a conversation between one of Nabokov's later novels, *Transparent Things*, the philosophical works of French philosopher Bergson, and the works, famously eccentric and spectacularly idealist, of Anglo-Irish bishop Berkeley. Chapter 5 examines *Ada,* and expounds on the relation between time and ethics, with Immanuel Kant as main philosophical interlocutor. The sixth chapter brings to the fore a writer who is not usually awarded a place in the pantheon of traditional philosophers, but whose meandering metaphors and mental peregrinations have determined the course of twentieth-century continental philosophy so strongly, that it did not feel out of place to draw him, too, into the course of the ongoing conversation: Marcel Proust. A series of reflections featured in his *À*

[68] It should be remembered that the person descending back into the cave, according to Socrates, is likely to be "put to death." Cf. Book VII of Plato's *Republic*.

la recherche du temps perdu will be brought into contact with the moral complexity of *Lolita* in this chapter. Chapter 7 offers a reflection on *Pale Fire* in connection to a vocabulary on identity, creativity, autonomy, and self-sufficiency disentangled from the works of Friedrich Nietzsche. The final chapter, then, consists of an epilogue on the complicated dialectic of loss and happiness, and muses on these themes through the prismatic bezel of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight.*

The even-numbered chapters (2, 4, 6) in this thesis are predominantly concerned with close textual analysis in order to establish a specific relationship between one of Nabokov's texts and the philosophical content of one or more interlocutory text(s). The relation between Hegelian philosophy and *Bend Sinister* in chapter two; the mysterious echoes of Bergson and Berkeley in *Transparent Things*; and the Proustian predicament of *Lolita'*s Humbert Humbert in chapter six. These chapters aim in the first place to provide new insights into Nabokov's texts by having a closer look at them from the angle of a particular philosophical problematic. In the odd-numbered chapters (3, 5, 7) on the other hand, the focus veers more towards the analysis of philosophical problems and questions. The viability of pragmatist morals in chapter three; an interesting conceptual omission in Kant's moral philosophy in chapter 5; and the challenging aspects of our pursuit to "become what we are" in chapter 7. These chapters explore how Nabokov's texts can be used as a means to deepen our reflection on certain philosophical questions.

This is not to say that the first series of chapters is not at all concerned with philosophical reflection, nor that the second series completely lacks interest in providing us with a deeper understanding of Nabokov's texts. The distinction is solely one of focus and approach, and as such meant to maintain the interest of both philosophers and Nabokovians alike. Thus, the chapters in the even-numbered series still seek to contribute to philosophical reflection as well (sections 2.5, 4.4, and 6.6 are all explicit examples of this). Conversely, the content of the odd-numbered series of chapters consists in more than just philosophical commentary, and still incorporates extensive literary-critical analyses of Nabokov's texts (sections 3.5, 5.2, 7.1 and 7.3 can be cited as clear examples here). The overarching concern throughout the following pages, as stated before, is neither philosophy nor literary criticism, but the conversation between the two. The focal variation

in the chapters below aims to keep this conversation as interesting as possible for all parties involved, myself included.

Although each individual chapter can be read on its own, it should be noted here that chapters 2-3, 4-5, and 6-7 are thematically paired with one another. To specify these themes beforehand: the first two chapters (2-3) are centered on the problem(atic)s of loss and suffering; the second "pair" (4-5) deals with the relationship between the conceptualization of time and space and its relation to the moral judgment of our actions; in the last two chapters (6-7) the focus shifts to questions concerning the ethics of identity.

Lastly, if one wanted to make a further division, it could be remarked that the first two pairs prepare the way for the last pair. It is in these last two chapters that one will find the most constructive approach; if the first two pairs are mostly (but by no means exclusively) explorative, then the last pair effectively tries to come up with a concrete conception of identity. The words "concrete conception of identity" are by no means intended to lead the reader to expect to be offered a guide to how life should be lived or that I will answer questions on what sort of individual one should aim to be and how to get there. I do not think it the task of philosophy or literature to offer (or even attempt to offer) such answers. The word "concrete" can be traced back to the Latin verb *concrescere*, "to grow together." Keeping in mind this etymology, one could say that the last two chapters aim to present a conception of identity that has, so to speak, "grown together" from the conversations that are staged here between Nabokov and his philosophical interlocutors. Thus, whereas the first two pairs merely explore these conversations, the last pair tries to effectively construct or reconstruct something out of the conversations.

After this, the final chapter (8) does not offer a conclusion. What has grown together does not have to be unified, summarized, or cut to conclusion. One does not have to bring down the tree in order to harvest its fruits. Instead, chapter 8 takes the form of an epilogue that stresses the need to recognize that if all constructive efforts in the domain of human reflection arise from wonder, something of this original source of reflection should be reflected at the point where reflection comes to its provisional end (and the word "end" is here to be understood in the specific sense of a *telos* as established in the section above). To do justice to this original source of reflection and the continuous mental harvesting it invites us to, the epilogue seeks to reflect and "re-muse" on what it means to lose

something or someone. It shows how that which in the first place drove us to a reflection on suffering (the phenomenon of loss), may just as well bring us around to a reflection on its very opposite, that other ultimate notion in the discourse of ethics: happiness.

Chapter 2: Circling around Hegel: Bent Pens, Sinister Problems

2.1. Nabokov and Hegel

The explicit presence of Hegelian vocabulary in some of Nabokov's works has led various commentators, from the 1960s up until today, to believe that Nabokov's "system of metaphysics is essentially Hegelian,"[69] and that detailed readings of certain novels would reveal a sympathetic stance towards Hegelian dialectics on Nabokov's part.[70] Taking into account the biographical material at hand, we have, indeed, good reasons to assume that Nabokov was familiar with Hegel's thought. Simon Karlinsky points out that "Nabokov had occasion to study in depth […] Hegel, Feuerbach, Fourier, Saint-Simon and Marx" while working on the biographical section on Chernyshevsky that was to become a substantial part of his last Russian novel, *The Gift*.[71] In his memoir *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov puts this familiarity on display:

> The Spiral is a spiritualized circle. In the spiral form, the circle, uncoiled, unwound, has ceased to be vicious; it has been set free. I thought this up when I was a schoolboy, and I also discovered that Hegel's triadic series (so popular in old Russia) expressed merely the essential spirality of all things in their relation to time. Twirl follows twirl, and every synthesis is the thesis of the next series. If we consider the simplest spiral, three stages may be distinguished in it, corresponding to those of the triad: We can call "thetic" the small curve or arc that initiates the convolution centrally; "antitethic" the larger arc that faces the first in the process of continuing it; and "synthetic" the still ampler arc that continues the second while following the first along the outer side. And so on.[72]

The same familiarity with Hegel and the tradition of German idealism resurfaces multiple times in Nabokov's commentary to his *Eugene Onegin* translation,[73] and is visibly drawn

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[69] Boyd, Brian. *Stalking Nabokov*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, pp. 59-60. See also: Boyd, Brian. *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990, pp. 294-295.
[70] Williams, Carol T. "Nabokov's Dialectical Structure." In: *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, vol. 8, no. 2, spring 1967, pp. 250-267.
[71] Karlinsky, Simon (ed.). *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya. The Nabokov-Wilson Letters, 1940-1971*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979, p. 14.
[72] *Speak, Memory*, p. 594.
[73] Pushkin, Alexander. *Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse, translated from the Russian, with a commentary by Vladimir Nabokov*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975 (rev. ed.). See for example, Nabokov's note

from in an epistolary discussion with fellow writer (and at that time still friend) Edmund Wilson concerning the latter's *To the Finland Station*.[74]

Given the presence of all these biographical clues, it is not strange that the critics I mentioned have seen reflections of Nabokov's familiarity with Hegel in a number of his novels.[75] And yet, as even Carol T. Williams, who convincingly reveals a Hegelian presence in almost all of Nabokov's novels, is forced to admit, there is one Nabokov novel that seems to offer a resistance to Hegel, or at least, to certain interpretations of Hegel's views: *Bend Sinister*. Williams, who is reluctant to give up her overall interpretation, solves this problem by positing that "Nabokov does not in fact criticize the idealist [i.e., Hegel] so much as those after him who implanted their own notions in his philosophy" and by stressing that "like an Artist, Hegel ignores his own theory." [76] These affirmations strike me as problematic and I think Williams passes over this little bump in her Hegelian reading of Nabokov's oeuvre too quickly when she concludes, on the next page of her article, that, even though Nabokov may not agree with the historicist tendencies in Hegel's philosophy, he still appears to be sympathetic to what she calls the "vital truth" of Hegel's system, which is taken to be his dialectic.[77]

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on Dmitri Venevetinov: "A somewhat Lenskian figure, the minor poet Dmitri Venevetinov (he committed suicide in 1827, at the age of twenty-one) had, I think, more talent than Lenski, but the same naïve urge to seek spiritual guides and masters. With other young men, he ardently flocked to the altars of German "romantic philosophy" (whose fumes were to mingle so paradoxically with those of Slavophilism, one of the most tedious creeds ever thought of), adoring Schelling and Kant, as the young men of the next generation were to adore Hegel, sinking thence to Feuerbach" (vol. II, p. 230). Cf. Also: "Poets begin with this [a panpipe] Arcadian instrument, graduate to the lyre or lute, and end by relying on the free reeds of their own vocal cords – which closes the circle with a Hegelian clasp" (Vol. II, p. 275). Elsewhere, in a more general sense, Nabokov mentions the "[…] Germanic mists of idealistic philosophic thought" (Vol. III, p. 119).

[74] *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya*, p. 36. The part on Hegel runs: "Your [i.e., Wilson's] criticism of Marxism is so ferocious that you kick out the Marxism stool from under the feet of Lenin, who is left dangling in midair. Incidentally, you are quite wrong about Hegel's triad being based upon the triangle (with a phallic implication which reminds me of a solemn Freudian contention that children like playing ball because balls remind boys of their mother's breast and girls of their father's balls). The triad (for what it's worth) is really the idea of a circle; to give a rough example: you come back (synthesis) to your starting point (thesis) after visiting the antipodes (antithesis) with the accumulated impressions of the globe enlarging your initial conception of your home town."

[75] To Boyd's and Williams' remarks can be added a third account, by Nabokov's own son Dmitri, who briefly discusses the supposed Hegelian structure of a variety of Nabokov's novels and plays. See his "Nabokov and the Theatre." In: Nabokov, Vladimir. *The man from the USSR and Other Plays. Introductions and translations by Dmitri Nabokov*. New York: Harcourt, 1984, p. 15.

[76] Williams, *art. cit.*, p. 251.

[77] Williams, *art. cit.*, p. 252.

This conclusion might be too rash. In this chapter I will attempt to show how a closer reading of *Bend Sinister* may reveal a more persistent criticism, not only of the political and historicizing strands of Hegel's philosophy, but also, more fundamentally, of certain aspects of his metaphysics that touch at the very heart of the dialectic. I do not want to argue that critics like Boyd and Williams are mistaken when they speak of Nabokov as influenced by Hegelian thought. What I do want to suggest however, is that we might, on the basis of *Bend Sinister*, want to reconsider his final evaluation of Hegel's philosophy as a purely positive one. Nonetheless, my main point will not concern the problematic of influence. Rather, I want to show that once we start looking closer to the problem of dialectics in *Bend Sinister*, the book may offer us something broader, namely, an interesting way of entering a philosophical discussion of Hegel's work that goes back to Hegel's own lifetime, and has stretched all the way down to the twenty-first century. This discussion, which in the history of philosophy has been framed as the discussion concerning the relationship between the "particular" and the "whole" (or "totality") can be of interest to both Nabokov scholars and philosophers, and one of my overarching intentions is to try and bring these two creeds closer together.

2.2. Parts and (W)holes

The philosophical discussion concerning particulars and the way they relate to a totality or whole can be formulated in multiple ways, and has resurfaced in many different forms over the course of time. In its purely metaphysical form, it centers on the value of the single object amidst the totality of nature or the world. In its epistemological form, it dwells on the relationship between the "I" and what is "Other" to this "I." In its social form, it focuses on the status and role of the individual in society, or, in modern political terms, the relationship between the freedom of the individual and the power of the state. In its historical form, it analyzes the role of the single event against the background of the totality of History.

In Hegel's philosophy, especially in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, these different formulations frequently overlap. Given the famous contentions in its preface that "the true is the whole" and that "the whole is nothing other than the essence of consummating itself

through its development,"[78] this is of course to be expected: if thought develops dialectically into truth, then the *structure* of all these truths – yet not necessarily their contents – must be formally alike. The structural unity of each and every truth is embodied by and in the pervasiveness of Hegel's notion of dialectics.[79]

There are many views on how best to explain the inner workings of the dialectical process, and there are indeed many ways of entering into the (sometimes sibylline) sphere of the dialectic. One of the most common ways is to start from Hegel's analysis of Being and Nothingness in the *Logic*,[80] but for my purposes here, it seems better to start from a different point, i.e., from Hegel's famous analysis of sense-certainty that constitutes the opening pages of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.

Our initial relationship to the world around us is what Hegel calls an "immediate" relationship. We have knowledge of what immediately appears before us, *as it simply appears before us.* This knowledge, which Hegel calls the knowledge of sense-certainty, appears to us at first as a very rich and noble form of knowledge, because it lets, so to speak, its object simply be: through it the subject "has the object before it in its perfect entirety."[81] If we were to give the matter only a little reflection though, this richest form of knowledge will soon reveal itself as the poorest form of knowledge, for this form of knowledge has *only* one thing to say, namely, that an object "is." The object, for this form of knowledge, is "a pure This," and stays only this. However, it soon becomes evident to us that sense-certainty implies two *different* "Thises," one This being the I, the other This being the object. From this point onwards, many epistemological options present themselves, and Hegel describes these options. Ultimately, however, Hegel will say that the self, within this relationship of sense-certainty, is fundamentally unable to *actually* grasp

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[78] Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Phenomenology of Spirit* (transl. A. V. Miller). Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977, p. 11.

[79] I do not mean to turn Hegel here into a banal one-trick pony by reducing the many-sidedness of his different works to one sole principle. Also, I do not want to imply, as some commentators have done in the past, that the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is social philosophy masquerading as metaphysics, or, inversely, that the *Philosophy of History* is metaphysics masquerading as political philosophy. I only want to point out that the overarching truth of dialectics implies certain structural analogies on the formal level of reasoning. The latter argument has also been advanced by Yirmiyahu Yovel. See: *Hegel's Preface to the Phenomenology of Spirit*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005, pp. 13-14.

[80] See, for a short discussion of this issue: Matson, Wallace. *A New History of Philosophy, Volume II: From Descartes to Searle*. New York: Harcourt Publishers, 2000 (2nd ed.), p. 475.

[81] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit,* p. 58.

any particular This. Those who think they do are either fooling themselves, or have simply not yet reached the end of the dialectical road, and hence are unlikely to possess an adequate comprehension of the whole. The object, which, to point out its particularity, might be described to constitute a "This-here-now," in fact can never be just this. This thought can be brought home to us if only we consider the fact that "this,"' "here," and "now" are themselves universal terms. The particular object (this particular "This") reveals itself to be always already tainted by universality. Thus the dialectical method reveals particularity to be invested by its negation, universality.

But Hegel does not want to stop here. This negation (or negative mediation) of particularity leads him to envision the possibility of a positive mediation, which has us turn back from the universal to the particular in a way that takes into account this negativity and brings it back home to the self. Hegel uses the example of a piece of paper. When I wish to ground the particularity of this piece of paper by stressing that it is *this* piece of paper, I am merely pointing out the most banal and general fact about it: that it is a This ("the divine nature" of language reversing the meaning of what I want to say).[82] This piece of paper, as a "This," has no actual existence for Hegel. But that does not mean it cannot have actuality at all. It only means that we have to follow the curve where language leads us, and become conscious of the fact that *this* piece of paper can only be said to meaningfully exist by acknowledging the fact that it only *is* as part of a larger whole, that its "thisness" depends on its being a part of a larger, and eventually, *the* larger whole. For if we just keep following the sequence of spiraling curves, our endpoint will be the whole as (what Hegel calls) "Absolute Spirit." The final whole, then, is the ultimate synthesis, where all differences are sublated, or, more precisely, where division and unity are absolutely reunited. The younger Hegel formulates it very succinctly when he writes: "The Absolute is the identity of identity and non-identity; opposition and unity are both together in it."[83]

The reason I've turned to Hegel's example of the piece of paper is that this object seems to have a mysteriously close relationship to another object which has become famous amongst many of Hegel's detractors. The object I am referring to is a pen. A pen,

[82] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit,* p. 66.
[83] Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Differenz des Fichte'schen und Schelling'schen Systems der Philosophie*. Leipzig: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1928 (1801), p. 77. I'm using Charles Taylor's English translation of this fragment. In: *Hegel and Modern Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979, p. 14.

indeed, and not just anyone's pen – Krug's Pen. The name "Krug" will sound familiar to both readers of Nabokov's *Bend Sinister*, who will recognize in it the last name of its main character, Adam Krug, and to Hegelians, who will recognize in it the name of one of Hegel's contemporaries, Wilhelm Traugott Krug. The word "Krug," in Russian, means "circle," and many Nabokovians have incorporated this fact into their interpretation in one way or another.[84] Although this has yielded some very interesting and convincing results, I think it may have also caused them to refrain from looking beyond the linguistic dimension of the name of *Bend Sinister*'s protagonist to explore the "historic" dimension of his name. For it might be asked: between the historical Krug of Hegel's time and Nabokov's fictional Krug, could certain family resemblances be discerned? Before I can start to answer that question, a quick word about the "historical" philosopher needs to be said.

Wilhelm Traugott Krug (1770-1842) was a contemporary and, as a Neo-Kantian philosopher, one of Hegel's earliest critics. Being a prolific philosopher himself, Krug was a widely published author during his lifetime. Unfortunately, the course of time has reduced his importance in the history of philosophy to not much more than a modest supporting role as the protagonist in the single (and singularly famous) footnote the later Hegel devoted to him in his *Naturphilosophie*:

> Related to this, Mr. Krug has naïvely challenged the philosophy of nature to accomplish the daring feat of *just* deducing his pen.[85] – Only when Science should be so far advanced that all the more important matters of heaven and earth, past and present, would be solved already, when nothing of greater importance asks for our understanding, only then can we start to offer him hope with regard to the achievement he desires to see realized, and the adulation of *his* pen.[86]

[84] See, for example: Boyd, Brian. *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991, p. 104.

[85] I use the word "pen" to translate the German word "Schreibfeder," which, in a strictly literal translation of Hegel's note should be translated as "writing quill." In opting for "pen," I am following many twentieth-century commentators and text books on the subject of the philosophy of history, all of them commonly referring to the Krug-Hegel debate and the metaphysical questions it entails as the problematic of "Krug's pen." I will make a brief remark on the pen/quill question below.

[86] Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. "Naturphilosophie," par. 250 in: *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1969 (1830), p. 203n. My translation. The original reads: "Hr. Krug hat in diesem und zugleich nach anderer Seite hin ganz naiven Sinne einst die Naturphilosophie aufgefordert, das Kunststück zu machen, *nur* seine Schreibfeder zu deduzieren. – Man hätte ihm etwa zu dieser Leistung und respektiven Verherrlichung *seiner* Schreibfeder Hoffnung machen können, wenn der einst die Wissenschaft so weit vorgeschritten und mit allem Wichtigern im Himmel und auf Erden in der Gegenwart und Vergangenheit im Reinen sei, daß es nichts Wichtigeres mehr zu begreifen gebe."

This note was appended by Hegel to his *Naturphilosophie* in 1830. Krug is being sarcastically treated as a dimwitted philosopher who has deigned to challenge the great Hegel, as an idealist philosopher, to pull off the "Kunststück" of deducing his own pen from the absolute system of natural philosophy. The "challenge" Krug has posed to Hegel does not even strike Hegel as a real challenge – Krug's pen, a mere trifle in Hegel's eyes, is not even worthy of the philosopher's attention, at least, not for philosophy in its present state. Hegel is reacting in this note to a statement Krug made in a polemical piece written in 1801, where Krug had remarked:

> The other teachers of science are spending most of their time in and around their cities of science and are devouring their pens, whilst in fact, they cannot deduce these nor themselves using a pen [i.e., from what they write with their pens].[87]

Hegel had already countered Krug's article in the same year it appeared,[88] but it appears Krug's challenge, even though considered to be outrageously naive by Hegel, does seem to

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[87] Krug, Wilhelm Traugott. *Wie der ungemeine Menschenverstand die Philosophie nehme; an dem kritisch-philosophischen Journale der Herren Schelling und Hegel*. Leipzig: Buxtehude, 1802, p. 32. My translation. The original reads: "Die übrigen Wissenschaftslehrer sitzen auch noch großtentheils in und um ihre Wissenschaftesstadt herum und devoriren ihre Schreibfedern, weil sie weder diese noch sich selbst mit den Schreibfedern deduciren können [...]."

[88] See: Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. "Wie der gemeine Menschenverstand die Philosophie nehme, - dargestellt an Werken des Herrn Krug" in: *Werke Band II*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979, pp. 194-195. Here Hegel is much more explicit in his dismissal of Krug as a philosopher. He writes: "Die *zweite* Inkonsequenz, die Herrn Krug auffällt, ist, daß versprochen sei, das ganze System unserer Vorstellungen solle deduziert werden; und ob er schon selbst eine Stelle im transzendentalen Idealismus gefunden hat, worin der Sinn dieses Versprechens ausdrücklich erläutert ist, so kann er sich doch nicht enthalten, wieder überhaupt zu vergessen, daß hier von Philosophie die Rede ist. Herr Krug kann sich nicht enthalten, die Sache wie der gemeinste Plebs zu verstehen und zu fordern, es solle jeder Hund und Katze, ja sogar Herrn Krugs Schreibfeder deduziert werden, und da dies nicht geschieht, so meint er, es müsse seinem Freunde der kreißende Berg und das kleine, kleine Mäuschen einfallen; *man hätte* sich nicht sollen das Ansehen geben, als ob man das ganze System der Vorstellungen deduzieren wolle [...]. Komisch ist es, wie Herr Krug denn doch so gnädig ist, den Philosophen, der sich das Ansehen eines Meisters in der Philosophie gebe, jedoch nicht so scharf beim Worte nehmen zu wollen; sondern er verlangt nur *etwas Weniges*, nur die Deduktion von einer bestimmten Vorstellung, z.B. *dem Monde* mit allen seinen Merkmalen, oder einer Rose, einem Pferd, einem Hunde oder Holz, Eisen, Ton, einer Eiche oder auch nur von seiner Schreibfeder. Es sieht aus, als ob Herr Krug den Idealisten mit solchen Forderungen die Sache leicht habe machen wollen, daß er vom Sonnensystem nur einen untergeordneten Punkt, den Mond, oder als etwas noch viel Leichteres seine Schreibfeder aufgegeben hat. Begreift denn aber Herr Krug nicht, daß die Bestimmtheiten, die im transzendentalen Idealismus unbegreiflich sind, der Naturphilosophie, von deren Unterschied von dem transzendentalen Idealismus er gar nichts zu wissen scheint, soweit von ihnen – wie von Herrn Krugs Schreibfeder nicht – in der Philosophie die

have left some impression (there has to be some reason he chooses to take it up again almost 28 years later). And, ironically, however Hegel may have felt about Krug and his naive challenge, the problem of "Krug's pen" did go down into philosophical history, and is, even today, still being discussed amongst contemporary Hegelians and other philosophers. Thus, in his evaluation of Hegel's section on sense-certainty I referred to above, William Desmond compares Krug's pen to Parmenides' dirt, which Socrates was at a loss to reunite with the platonic theory of Ideas. Desmond asks: "Why not explode Hegel's dialectics of sense-certainty with the mystery of a rat's being – or for that matter, Krug's pen?" and goes on to argue that "Hegel runs away from the dirt of Krug's pen."[89]

"Krug's pen" has come to embody one of the oldest critiques of the Hegelian system as an absolute system. It questions the absoluteness of the final synthesis where identity and non-identity are reunited by asking: "But what of the original identity?" Something seems to get irrevocably lost in the process of dialectics, and this something is exactly the first "This" that Hegel deems to be an immature, or, if we want to be more severe in our judgment, valueless "This." Krug's pen puts this question to Hegel from the side of the particular object in its simplicity, but we can easily conceive how the criticism can be extended and posed from the side of the subject. In fact, this is exactly what someone like Kierkegaard will do, in reproaching Hegel that the system of speculative philosophy cannot satisfactorily *think* the existential I (or "empirical ego"), and pointing out that the speculative philosopher "in a sort of World-historical absent-mindedness" has forgotten what it means to be a human being. Not indeed, what it means to be a human being in general; for this is the sort of thing that one might even induce a speculative philosopher to agree to; but what it means that "you" and "I," "he" and "she," are human beings, each one for herself (himself).[90]

Rede sein kann, angehören? In derselben kann er eine Dedukzion (ein Wort, dessen Bedeutung hier sowenig taugt als seine Orthographie) von einem derjenigen Dinge, die er vorschlägt, vom Eisen finden."

[89] Desmond, William. *Perplexity and Ultimacy: Metaphysical Thoughts from the Middle*. New York: SUNY Press, 1995, p. 54.

[90] Kierkegaard, Søren. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Cited from: Bretall, Robert (ed.). *A Kierkegaard Anthology*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973, p. 203. Cf. also p. 206: "Being an individual man is a thing that has been abolished, and every speculative philosopher confuses himself with humanity at large, whereby he becomes something infinitely great – and at the same time nothing at all."

Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel takes us into the domain of ethics and morality. Elsewhere, he specifies that "[…] the immorality of our age is perhaps not to be found in particular cases of lust or sensuous desires, but more in a totalitarian disconcern for individual existence."[91] Is Kierkegaard right to do so? Given that this moral discussion will be of some interest in connection with Nabokov too, let me briefly review Hegel's stance on the matter using his own vocabulary.

Hegel makes a distinction between *Sittlichkeit* and *Moralität*. *Sittlichkeit* is the term Hegel reserves for the idea of a set of ethical and moral imperatives, which are present in societies in the form of customs and regulations. The domain of *Sittlichkeit* is that of general laws, in its "house" (as Hegel speaks of it in relation to the unity of the family), regulations apply not to individual beings ("not to *this Man*, or to *this Child*") but to individuals in general ("Ein Mann, Kinder"). The whole of these regulations, rules and customs as they regulate an actual society together forms the ethical truth of its time, or as Hegel puts it: "The *living ethical* [*sittlich*] world is Spirit in its truth."[92]

The term *Sittlichkeit* is opposed to that of *Moralität*. At the pure level of *Sittlichkeit,* there is no discrepancy between the hypothetical domain of what "ought to be," and actual moral reality. On the level of *Moralität*, *per contra*, such a discrepancy does exist. Morality points to the freedom of the will and the possibility to heed *Sittlichkeit*'s call or to ignore it.[93] This means that the discrepancy between the two has to exist on some level, in order to make freedom for the individual at all possible. It is only on the level of the fulfilled liberal society that *Moralität* can return to its original unity with *Sittlichkeit* through an ultimate sublation of the discrepancy in the notion of the free will (that is, for Hegel, a moral will recognizing itself in the will of *Sittlichkeit*, thus turning it into a will that wills itself).[94]

I interpret Kierkegaard's argument as directed partly against Hegel's ontology, but more essentially against this ethical part of Hegel's philosophy. Kierkegaard fears that what he calls "the individual existence" (what in Hegelian terms would be called "moral existence") does not *effectively* survive the moment of its synthesis with *Sittlichkeit*. In

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[91] Kierkegaard, Søren. *Philosophical Fragments*. In: *Writings*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978, vol. VII, p. 355.
[92] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 265.
[93] Cf. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 390-391.
[94] Cf. Charles Taylor's comparison of the two concepts from the point of view of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right.* Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, pp. 82-83.

Kierkegaard's eyes, the synthesis can only be violent towards the individual because it will eventually lead to the self being subjected to something other than itself. This, at least, is how the phrase "totalitarian disconcern for individual existence" can be read in relation to the indictment of "immorality."

How fair is this to Hegel? Hegel has, of course, completely different aims: his reason to refuse to bestow any serious value on what he calls the "pure I" is that he thinks it is empty. His quarrel is not with Kierkegaard (whose work he never read) but with Kant and the liberal tradition. And yet Kierkegaard's concern is to be taken seriously, if only because it points to a potential weakness or blind spot of the dialectical method: Hegel's dialectics, because of the ultimate rationality of its logic, always runs the risk of forgetting the original and simple thisness of the individual. William Desmond succinctly formulates the point as follows: "Hegel is blind to this truth of the idiotic 'this.' He has no patience with it. It is immediately dissolved into the dialectical universal."[95]

More questions can be asked. What is the pertinence of these criticisms of Hegel? Do his dialectical method and his idea of the ultimate oneness of all reality as Absolute Spirit really wreak havoc on the particularity of a pen or an individual? Does Hegel really forget about the first thisness of the piece of paper after it has been sublated in the whole of mediated experience? And if so, does this allow us to go as far as someone like Karl Popper, who takes Hegel's epistemology and ontology as the bases for Hegel's historicism,[96] which in turn is taken to be the foundation of German nationalism and Soviet communism,[97] identifying Hegel's philosophy with "the philosophy of modern totalitarianism"?[98] And even

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[95] Desmond, *Perplexity and Ultimacy*, *op. cit.*, p. 60. For reasons I will return to below, I do not think this is completely honest to Hegel. Hegel does seem to show significant awareness of the problem at the end of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

[96] Popper, Karl. *The Open Society and its Enemies, Vol. II: The High Tide of Prophecy: Hegel, Marx, and the aftermath*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966 (1945), pp. 42-44.

[97] Popper, *op. cit.*, pp. 49-58.

[98] Popper, *op. cit.*, p. 78. In full, Popper writes: "I have tried to show the identity of Hegelian historicism with the philosophy of modern totalitarianism." If, after the harshness of his remarks we may still doubt about what the formula "identity of […] with" exactly means for the degree to which Popper holds Hegel personally responsible, the addendum Popper adds to a later edition of his books is very clear: "Hegel's identity philosophy, by contributing to historicism and to an identification of might and right, encouraged totalitarian modes of thought." Popper, *op. cit.*, p. 395. Popper offers many biographical reasons that suggest evil political intentions on Hegel's side. It does not seem right to me to suggest that Hegel would have endorsed any totalitarian use of his philosophy. The least one can say, is that if indeed Minerva's owl only spread her wings at the coming of dusk, Popper's interpretation would seem to completely pass over Hegel's thoughts concerning the *place* philosophical thought takes up in the chronology of reality.

if these critics are right, does this mean we have to conclude that Hegel's disregard for the particular in its primal particularity strikes a fatal hole into his magisterial Whole? Is the "This-here-now" the first of a series of holes that will force us to sink the whole ship of Absolute Spirit? If so, should not this purported "world-historical absent-mindedness" perplex us? At the same time: does a philosopher as sophisticated as Hegel strike us as the kind of man who would take his ship to sea without inspecting the solidity of the hull?

Before I attempt to answer these and other questions, I will now first turn to the other Krug I mentioned in passing, the fictional philosopher Adam Krug, who takes up the lead role in Nabokov's *Bend Sinister*.

2.3. Another Krug, Another Pen

Bend Sinister presents a dystopian universe; its social setting is a totalitarian regime headed by a dictator called Paduk, who seems to combine traits of three of the most truculent totalitarian leaders the historical twentieth century has known: Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler. In the introduction to the novel (appended in 1963), Nabokov admits that "there can be distinguished, no doubt, certain reflections in the glass directly caused by the idiotic and despicable regimes that we all know and that have brushed against me in the course of my life: worlds of tyranny and torture, of Fascists and Bolshevists, of Philistine thinkers and jack-booted baboons."[99] At the same time he stresses that "the influence of my epoch on my present book is as negligible as the influence of my works […] upon my epoch,"[100] thereby answering to his own criterion that true art does not imitate historical worlds or epochs, but rather creates its own independent world. [101]

[99] *Bend Sinister*, p. 164.
[100] *Ibid.*
[101] If I am still drawn to make the comparison between *Bend Sinister*'s Paduk and the three dictators I mentioned, this is not only because I think it provides a handy means of conveying a first glimpse of the sort of character he is, but also because I think Nabokov's assertion of the ultimate non-importance of these historical figures for his novel seems to me at least doubtful. Some twelve years later, in the introduction to *Tyrants Destroyed and Other Stories*, Nabokov himself makes the same historical comparison: "Hitler, Lenin, and Stalin dispute my tyrant's throne in this [i.e., "Tyrants Destroyed"] story – and meet again in *Bend Sinister*, 1947, with a fifth toad." For a more detailed discussion of the possible biographical sources of *Bend Sinister*, see John Burt Foster Jr.'s article on the novel in the *Garland Companion* (ed. Alexandrov), *op. cit.*, pp. 25-35, and also Brian Boyd, *The American Years*, *op. cit.*, pp. 93-97.

At the center of this fictional world, where a strange and intricate blend of Russian and German is spoken, stands Adam Krug, a highly individual philosopher said to be the "most original thinker of our times."[102] The novel starts with the elaboration of a double interruption that has just taken place in Krug's life: the death of his wife, Olga, and the unraveling of the (supposedly relatively) free society into a totalitarian state ruled by one of Krug's former school mates, Paduk (nicknamed "Toad"[103]). The principles upon which this state is governed are those of a system of thought called "Ekwilism," a system that was thought up by a (fictional) thinker named Fradrik Skotoma and shows obvious links to Marxist philosophy. Over the course of the novel, Krug's fate under this regime grows grimmer. Paduk's regime, aware of the fact that Krug is something of a philosophical celebrity, decides it wants to have him on its side; Krug, however, continues to refuse to give in to these solicitations. So Paduk (and his farcical henchmen) start looking for the "handle" that could coax Krug into servility. His friends are being captured and imprisoned one after the other. This affects Krug, but not to the point of giving in. It does lead him to the decision to flee Paduk's police state by crossing the border to another country. When he discusses the possibility of this escape with (unbeknownst to him) one of Paduk's spies, the regime is reminded of the fact that Krug has an eight-year-old son, David. David will prove to be the "handle" Paduk's regime was looking for, and after David's abduction, Krug cracks and offers to surrender, but on the exclusive condition that ("if, and only if"[104]), his son will be returned to him.

Unfortunately for both Krug and the regime, a mistake has been made by Paduk's poltroons: Krug's child has been mixed up with another child bearing the same last name, Arvid Krug, son of Martin Krug, "former vice-president of the Academy of Medicine."[105] David Krug, it will soon be found out, died a horrible death in one of the regime's social experiments at the "Institute for Abnormal Children." The end of the novel portrays Adam Krug's own death – "saved" by his madness, he is shot by a member of the regime.

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[102] *Bend Sinister*, p. 194.
[103] Ostensibly a play on the Shakespearean word "paddock," meaning toad.
[104] *Bend Sinister*, p. 340. For an interesting interpretation connecting the "bend" in the title with both the "curve in the handle" that is David, and the meaning of Krug's name in Russian (i.e., circle), see: Hyman, Stanley Edgar. "The Handle: 'Invitation to a Beheading' and 'Bend Sinister.' " In: *TriQuarterly*, no. 17, winter 1970, pp. 69-70.
[105] *Bend Sinister*, p. 338.

I want to start my analysis of the events leading up to Krug's death by stressing that it is not at all my intention to apply to them a Popperian kind of reduction, where Hegel's ontology is directly linked to political totalitarianism. I do think, however, that beneath the surface of the events that I have just described, lies a philosophical problematic that is very similar to the one that has become known in philosophical history as Krug's pen; the relation of this problematic to Hegel, his political philosophy and *its* relation to Marxism remains to be discussed. Let me also remark that, not wanting to risk Paduk's mistake, it is neither my aim to confuse here the identities of the two Krugs, Adam and Wilhelm Traugott. That being said, I do think the text of *Bend Sinister* offers certain clues that show us Nabokov was aware of the historical Krug and his pen, and it makes sense to assume that if Nabokov's knowledge of Hegel was as extensive as the biographical material suggests, he must have come across Krug's name at least in the footnote to the *Philosophy of Nature* cited above. Eventually though, it is not these biographical matters I intend to settle. Rather, I want to try and show how the philosophical problematic of Krug's pen (as set out above) may constitute a fruitful way of entering into Nabokov's text, and how, once this way taken, it can constructively lead us out of the text and back to the philosophical context we started from.

The first scene I want to take a closer look at is one that takes place not too far from the beginning of the novel. In this scene we find Krug and his academic colleagues in a meeting concerning the fate of their university. The regime has threatened to shut down the university, and its president, Azureus, has convoked its most important staff members with the aim of inducing them to sign a certain declaration expressing their agreement with Paduk's regime. After a notably farcical speech ("a short memorandum, a manifesto if you wish"[106]) reminding one of Leninism in its vilest form, Azureus asks his colleagues to sign a declaration:

> Dr. Azureus, whose oratorical zest seemed to have waned, briefly informed his audience that the declaration which all had to read and sign, had been typed in the same number of copies as there would be signatures. He had been given to understand, he said, that this would lend a dash of individuality to every copy. What was the real object of this arrangement he did not explain, and, let

[106] *Bend Sinister*, p. 207.

> us hope, did not know, but Krug thought he recognized in the apparent imbecility of the procedure the eerie ways of the toad.[107]

The members' signatures are taken to be the expression of their individuality, and by appending them to the documents they have received, they are to communicate "a dash" of this "individuality" to the declaration that is to be signed. Thus the academics' ritual of signing the copies begins, and the narrator provides us with an extensive description. First up is the zoologist, who:

> […] did not bother to read his, signed it with a borrowed pen, returned the pen over his shoulder and became engrossed again in the only inspectable stuff he had found so far – and old Baedeker with views of Egypt and ships of the desert in silhouette.[108]

Then there is Dr. Alexander, who

> […] sat down at the rosewood desk, unbuttoned his jacket, shot out his cuffs, tuned the chair proximally, checked its position as a pianist does; then produced from his vest pocket a beautiful glittering instrument made of crystal and gold; looked at its nib; tested it on a bit of paper; and, holding his breath, slowly unfolded the convolutions of his name. Having complemented the ornamentation of its complex tail, he raised his pen and surveyed the glamour he had wrought. Unfortunately, at this precise moment, his golden wand (perhaps resentful of the concussions that its master's various exertions had been transmitting to it throughout the evening) shed a big black tear on the valuable typescript.[109]

The description of Alexander's struggle with his ornate pen may strike us as unexpectedly elaborate. Reminding ourselves, however, of the earlier passage where the signatures were linked to the individuality of their bearers, this fragment, especially the "big black tear" at the end, reveals the possibility of a deeper meaning. If we take the signature to be the marker of individuality, and the pen as the instrument which is used to append it to the

[107] *Bend Sinister*, p. 210.
[108] *Bend Sinister*, p. 211.
[109] *Ibid.*

generality of the form, can we interpret the silence of the tear as expressing a sadness related to the individuality that is being relinquished? Let us read on.

After zooming in on Dr. Alexander, the narrator focuses only briefly on professor Gleeman, who absentmindedly "affixed his dainty but strangely illegible signature," and professor Beuret, who "[…] seeing that others signed, signed."[110] Also mentioned are the professors of economics and history, who "appended their signatures in unison and then noticed with dismay that while comparing notes they had somehow swapped copies, for each copy had the name and address of the potential undersigner typed out in the left-hand corner."[111]

The description of the historical-economical duo signing "in unison" seems to me a sly play on Marxian vocabulary, where the separate individuals representing "economics" and "history" merge shortly into a dialectical unity. Of course one thinks of the Marxist (not necessarily endorsed by Karl Marx himself) dogma concerning the determination of history by the laws of economy. I interpret this fragment as a play on just this concept. But, through its interconnection with the first fragment I cited and the following descriptions of the other signings, I also read more into it. To explain what I mean by that, I turn to the final person up for signing: Krug.

> Adam Krug too, he too, he too, unclipped his rusty wobbly fountain pen. The telephone rang in the adjacent study. [….] Dr. Azureus stopped hovering and felt his old heart stumble as it went upstairs (metaphorically) with its guttering candle when Krug nearing the end of the manifesto (three pages and a half, sewn) pulled at the pen in his breast pocket. A sweet aura of intense relief made the candle rear its flame as old Azureus saw Krug spread the last page on the flat wooden arm of his cretonned armchair and unscrew the muzzle part of his pen, turning it into a cap. With a quick flip-like delicately precise stroke quite out of keeping with his burly constitution, Krug inserted a comma in the fourth line. Then (*chmok*) he remuzzled, reclipped his pen (*chmok*) and handed the document to the distracted President. […] "Legal documents excepted," answered Krug, "and not all of them at that, I never have signed, nor ever shall sign, anything not written by myself."[112]

[110] *Ibid.*
[111] *Ibid.*
[112] *Bend Sinister*, p. 212.

Abruptly breaking the rhythm of logical expectation and of Azureus's desire, Krug, just when he seems on the point of fulfilling the latter's wish, does not sign the declaration, but, *his* attention being drawn by what to Azureus must look like a negligible detail – the faltering rhythm of a phrase – inserts a comma. With this comma, Krug not only interrupts the rhythm of the phrase in which he asserts it, he also interrupts the rhythm of Azureus's and the reader's expectation. Until the very last moment, the reader is led to believe that Krug will sign the document with "a quick flip-like delicately precise stroke." But just at this moment, the pen stroke is revealed to express the very opposite of a personal signature: the insertion of a simple comma. And yet this comma, this unexpected break, this negligible detail, usurping the place of the signature Paduk wanted, comes to express something of intimate importance, comes to express an act of individual resistance. The comma *is* Krug's refusal, *is* the moment where the rhythm of a certain logic that had been set in motion during the signing of the declaration by the different academics is disrupted.

It was Paduk's intention to have the academics lend a dash of their individuality to a declaration that has them agree to relinquish part of their particular identities to the communal project of the state. In fact, looking closely at the vocabulary used, it does not seem too far-fetched to say the mysterious "arrangement" in which Krug recognizes "the eerie ways of the Toad," is constituted by a sort of dialectical process. The individual professors are to append to the manifesto (embodying the communal philosophy of the state) their signatures, which is said to express their individuality. What we have here, is what can be said to be the most idiosyncratic element of a man's authorship (his signature), being given over to what is most radically other to this highly individual element of authorship (a declaration/manifesto written by someone else); Paduk's attempt to have the professors sign this document can thus been seen as an attempt to dialectically reunite these two opposites, and turn the two products (signature and document) into the synthesis of the signed document.

Dr. Alexander, who, as we later learn, will become a faithful servant of Paduk, does sign, and his ornate pen (not insignificantly described as an "instrument") weeps. Krug, taking out his "rusty wobbly fountain pen," declines to take part in the ritual. He bluntly refuses to give up what is supposed to define him in his individuality and asserts never to

have signed "anything not written by myself."[113] Krug uses his pen instead to insert what appears to be, as a simple sign, the merest of trifles. At the same time this comma, in its rigid and robust "This-, here-, and nowness," is what irrevocably breaks up both the rhythm of the document and the logic of the scene, and we are strangely reminded of the historical Krug, who, more than a century earlier, launched *his* pen in an attempt to call a halt to what he conceived to be the inconsiderate absoluteness of Hegel's speculative logic. Thus, Krug eventually actualizes a fear expressed by the words Azureus speaks to him before the signing ritual takes place: "You are a dreamer. A thinker. You do not realize the circumstances. […] You are jeopardizing the – everything...."[114]

Could it be that the rustiness of Krug's fountain pen is due to the fact that this pen is a hundred and fifty years old? What can be affirmed, in any case, is that both "Krugs" make use of their pens in remarkably similar ways, and that knowledge of the historical philosopher's pen seems to contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of the fictional philosopher's pen in the scene just discussed. One might object here that in the historical Krug's argumentation the pen figures as "an end," whereas for the fictional Krug, it figures as "a means to an end." Or that the first Krug's pen was, if we want to be very precise about it, a *Feder* (quill), and not a fountain pen. But that is beside the point I wish to make. I'm focusing here on what these pens, as singular objects, represent, on the question of their representational value and the disruptive implications this entails for the philosophical and fictional logic whose absorption they are meant to resist. [115]

Earlier I explained how a thinker like Kierkegaard can be seen as someone who takes the argument of Krug's pen into the realm of subjectivity by trying to secure for the existential subject a position quite similar to that of Krug's pen. The particularity of the pen

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[113] Even after a later plead from his colleague Hedron, insisting Krug be pragmatic ("What on earth does it matter? Affix your commercially valuable scrawl. Come on! Nobody can touch our circles – but we must have some place to draw them"), the philosopher stands firm ("Not in the mud, sir, not in the mud," said Krug, smiling his first smile of the evening"). *Bend Sinister*, p. 213.

[114] *Bend Sinister*, p. 209.

[115] The chapter following the one we discussed, recounting Krug's boyhood and his school time spent together with the Toad, confirms this thought. A mysterious device is presented there: the "padograph." The padograph, invented by Paduk's father, is a species of typing machine that can be used to reproduce an individual's handwriting once a sample of this has been provided to it. Boyd opposes this device to a translation of *Hamlet* made by one of Krug's friends Ember; I would oppose it to Krug's recalcitrant penmanship in the preceding chapter. Compare: Boyd, *The American Years*, p. 100: "Against the padograph's claim to replicate anyone's signature by means of a few levers, Nabokov sets Ember's translation of *Hamlet.*"

becomes the individuality of the I. In Nabokov's novel, the two are always already linked up in the way they are in the signing scene, where the particularity of the pen and the comma are linked to the individuality of the signature and the individual who is to yield it.

Nabokov's play on the dialectical method in chapter 4 of *Bend Sinister* may be the most elaborate one, but it is still only one of many. Degrading references to dialectics are made throughout the novel: The "individualistic behavior"[116] in Krug's boyhood is contrasted to that of his fellow students, and it is said that the headmaster "[…] felt justified in pointing out to teachers that if Adam Krug passed the final examinations with honors, his success would be dialectically unfair in regard to those of Krug's schoolmates who had less brains but were better citizens."[117] When one of Krug's friends, Maximov, tries to warn the mature Krug that this "individualistic behavior" will certainly get him into trouble, Krug feels no need to heed the message: " '[…] they will arrest you.' 'Non-Sense,' said Krug. 'Precisely. Let us call this hypothetical occurrence an utterly nonsensical thing. But the utterly nonsensical is a natural and logical part of Paduk's rule.' "[118] Maximov tries to point out to Krug that the kind of state ruled by Paduk is one that will strive to incorporate – *naturally* and *logically* – that which opposes it. Krug, a convinced individualist, does not even imagine the possibility: "Nothing can happen to Krug the Rock." "I am invulnerable. Invulnerable."[119]

Unfortunately, as the reader will soon find out, Krug is far from invulnerable. Krug's vulnerability has already been intimated to the reader through snatches of interior monologue revealing the dim gloom of a consciousness overpowered by disruptive musings on his lost wife, who "refuse[s] to be forgotten,"[120] and its sense will be considerably deepened by the death of his son in the chapters leading up to the end of *Bend Sinister.* This death, following an oversight of Paduk and his regime of ruffians (who, it is repeatedly stressed throughout the novel, have no concern at all for detail), is cruelly presented to Krug on a video screen. In this most cruel chapter of the book, Adam Krug's son David has been mixed up with Arvid Krug, son of Martin Krug, and been brought to the

[116] *Bend Sinister*, p. 225.
[117] *Bend Sinister*, p. 226.
[118] *Bend Sinister*, p. 238.
[119] *Bend Sinister*, p. 239.
[120] *Bend Sinister*, p. 277.

"Institute for Abnormal Children," where "so-called 'Orphans' " are "used to serve as a 'release instrument' for the benefit of the most interesting inmates with a so-called 'criminal' record […]."[121] Before Krug is presented with the video material, Crystalsen, a government official, explains the idea to Krug:

> The theory – and we are not here to discuss its worth, and you shall pay for my cuff if you tear it – was that if once a week the really difficult patients could enjoy the possibility of venting in full their repressed yearnings (the exaggerated urge to hurt, destroy, etc.) upon some little creature of no value to the community, then by degrees, the evil in them would be allowed to escape, so to say, "effundated," and eventually they would become good citizens.[122]

Of course, it is clear that what is being ridiculed here has no connection to Hegel or any possible interpretation of his philosophy. It is rather a particularly utilitarian interpretation of a series of ideas historically attributed to Freud that is aimed at here. Yet, when we read on, and come to Crystalsen's description of the concrete realization of "the theory," our Hegelian problematic does seem to resurge:

> A nurse led the "orphan" down the marble steps. The enclosure was a beautiful expanse of turf, and the whole place, especially in summer, looked extremely attractive, reminding one of some of those open-air theaters that were so dear to the Greeks. The "orphan" or "little person" was left alone and allowed to roam all over the enclosure. One of the photographs showed him lying disconsolately on his stomach and uprooting a bit of turf with listless fingers (the nurse reappeared on the garden steps and clapped her hands to make him stop. He stopped). After a while the patients or "inmates" (eight all told) were let into the enclosure. At first, they kept at a distance, eyeing the "little person." It was interesting to observe how the "gang" spirit gradually asserted itself. They had been rough lawless unorganized individuals, but now something was binding them, the community spirit (positive) was conquering the individual whims (negative); for the first time in their lives they were *organized*; Doktor von Wytwyl used to say that this was a wonderful moment: one felt that, as she quaintly put it, "something was really happening," or in technical language: the "ego," he goes "ouf" (out) and the pure "egg" (common extract of egoes) "remains." And then the fun began.[123]

[121] *Bend Sinister*, p. 340.
[122] *Ibid.*
[123] *Bend Sinister*, pp. 340-341.

The vocabulary the narrator chooses to describe this cruel experiment is striking. We have a little person who is facing a "gang" of eight inmates, whose "spirit" is said to be "gradually assert[ing] itself" as they are reducing to nothingness the "individual whims" of the "little person." Moreover, this organization of "community spirit" is described in explicitly dialectical terms. There is a "positive" community spirit, which incorporates the negativity of the individual that opposes it. The result is an "organized" community. In derisive philosophical vocabulary spoken with a Germanic accent, the process is summarized as the disappearance of the ego into the purity of a newly formed elliptical "egg."

When we add to this last fragment the play on "science" and "silence"[124] that occurs just before the actual airing of the film, it is hard to resist the temptation to see certain reverberations of the end of *The Phenomenology of Spirit* where the "pure I" disappears into the comprehending knowledge (*begreiffendes Wissen*) of systematic Science, which, in turn, must be mediated into the totality of the Absolute knowing of Spirit arrived at the end of its development as absolute Spirit.[125] The choice of vocabulary in the scene of David's death appears to point to something that science, in its striving to become spiritual, tends to overlook. Science in this absolutist form remains icily silent about something, or, as in the cruel experiment of the passage above, about *someone*; for absolute science has no attention for the individual I in its most simple individuality. If we are to take the critique (the historical) Krug and Kierkegaard put to the absolutist strain of Hegel's systematical thought and take it to its ultimate limit, Nabokov's description of the scene of David's death – where the personal pangs and warm sobs of the young child's actual suffering are surreptitiously buried beneath a cold and impersonal dialectical vocabulary – is the shape the anti-Hegelian critique would take in its most cruel form.

But should we really want to make a similar step in our interpretation? Would it not put us at risk to slide into a Popperian position, the sort of position where the dialectical structure of Hegel's metaphysical system is directly equated with the crude thoughts and ideas that were at the base of certain well-known social and moral evil events of the twentieth century? If we were to do that, a problem of a philosophical nature would

[124] *Bend Sinister*, p. 343. Also pointed out by Nabokov himself in a preface added to the novel in 1963. See: *Bend Sinister*, p. 166.
[125] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 490-491.

present itself. For this interpretation would demand we pass over the fact that *even* at the end of the development of Hegel's Spirit, *even* when we reach the phase of Absolute Spirit, Spirit in this form is still said to have some consideration, for Spirit must return to itself *in time*. Absolute Knowledge will always be forced back to the realm of the concrete and tangible, *because* it forms a whole with it.[126]

In that case, the essential question seems to be: *which* exact forms of history or time are still receptive of such a "return" for Hegel's Spirit? Can Spirit, at the point of wholeness and absoluteness, still effectually do justice to the smallest elements it has absorbed on its way up? Hegel seems to have been well aware of the dangers and the difficulties when he writes that Spirit is not a " '*tertium quid*' that casts the differences back into the abyss of the Absolute and declares that therein they are all the same."[127] Hegel's Spirit is no transcendent God, and I interpret his stress on its permanent immanent presence as a sign that he was well aware of the danger of losing the elemental individual *This* somewhere in the darker nooks at the bottom of his system. But the question remains: if Hegel was aware of the difficulty, did he do enough practical justice to it in the effectual working out of his system?

It is, I think, exactly to this crucial difficulty in dialectical thinking where a text like *Bend Sinister* takes us. Not by equating Hegelianism with totalitarianism or *vice versa*, as we saw Popper do,[128] but by intimately combining elements of tragic and comic fiction to stress (and restress) the fundamental difficulties of dialectical thought, which is to do more with it than simply to dismiss it altogether. To read *Bend Sinister* in this way also means to do more than excluding Hegel from its parameters by hiding him behind Marx or Lenin, as, possibly, Williams does. Some of the richness of the philosophical problematic that underlies *Bend Sinister* seems to get lost when we try to analyze it in socio-political terms alone.

Here I agree with Brian Boyd, who has remarked that *Bend Sinister* "[…] is not really a political novel at all; it is a philosophical one that aims to set out a certain philosophy of

[126] See: Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 489-491.
[127] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 490.
[128] Cf. note 98 above.

consciousness – which to be sure, has political consequences."[129] This philosophy of consciousness, according to Boyd, consists in a view that stresses the untrammeled primacy of individual consciousness over against anything that might constrain it: be it a totalitarian state, a random group of others, a collection of general ideas. As a biographer, Boyd is very much aware of Nabokov's personal liberal views in this matter, and indeed, Nabokov repeatedly stressed the independence of the individual consciousness against any form of collective consciousness: "True art deals not with the genus, and not even with the species, but with an aberrant individual of the species," he remarked in an interview.[130]

This view of *Bend Sinister* as an essentially philosophical novel can also be backed up by a detailed reading of its ending. Here, Krug, who now that his son has died has decided that he will not comply with the regime, is unexpectedly "saved" by the narrator of the story: "It was then that I felt a pang of pity for Adam and slid towards him along an inclined beam of pale light – causing instantaneous madness, but at least saving him from the senseless agony of his logical fate."[131] The prominent (because somewhat unexpected) presence of the adjective "logical" in this fragment suggests that the course of Krug's tragic fate was never a matter of politics, but one of logic, and, as I have tried to show, this logical struggle can be said to be one with dialectical logic. After all acts of rugged individualist opposition on Krug's side have failed to release him from his tragic fate, this "instantaneous madness" bestowed upon him by the narrator will provide our tragic hero with a way out, and his first reaction to it leads us to assume he is conscious of it: "With a smile of infinite relief on his tear-stained face, Krug lay back on the straw."[132]

In the final pages of the book we read how Krug is cut short by the bullets of Paduk's bodyguards as he hurls himself towards the latter, presumably in an attempt to revive an old school game where Krug used to sit on the Toad's slippery head. "The very last lap of his life had been happy and it had been proven to him that death was but a question of style."[133] Madness in the form of a deus ex machina and death as a matter of style provide Krug's way out of his personal tragedy. Death proves to be the ultimate spoke in the

[129] Boyd, *The American Years*, *op. cit.*, p. 97.
[130] *Strong Opinions*, p. 155.
[131] *Bend Sinister*, pp. 351-352.
[132] *Bend Sinister*, p. 352.
[133] *Bend Sinister*, p. 358.

machinery of a system that cannot be dialectically sublated. Krug's death, *this* death, constitutes a negativity that is so absolute in its tragedy, that no synthesis of it could possibly ensue. No more wife, no more son, no more Krug – this is the end of the line. Nabokov's own spirals may be of the sort where "every synthesis is the thesis of the next series,"[134] but Krug's personal spiral, and *Bend Sinister*'s, end with a period.

And yet, and yet.

2.4. From Modern *Sittlichkeit* to Metaxological Metaphysics

We may, as some philosophers are wont to, call Hegel a clown and "prove" he is a crook, so that we may be done with him – but this would entail missing out on some of the more potent possibilities his thought offers. What I want to do in these last sections of this chapter is to take a closer look at two contemporary philosophers who have tried to follow up on the potencies of dialectical thought in their own respective ways, to see if the case of Nabokov's Krug might have something to offer to a further discussion of the different forms of dialectical thought in Hegel's wake. These philosophers are Charles Taylor and William Desmond. Let us discuss Taylor first.

Charles Taylor reads Hegel in a historical, maybe even historicist fashion, but at the same time tries to have Hegel's philosophy exceed this historicity. On Taylor's view, Hegel's philosophy expresses his way of dealing with a fundamental problem that not only philosophy, but Western society as a whole saw itself confronted with, as the romantic movement stepped onto the stage of world history with the nineteenth century's reaction to the Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment, for Taylor, has one main ideal, which he links to Kant's philosophy and its "radical notion of freedom."[135] This ideal he calls the ideal of "radical autonomy,"[136] or sometimes more modestly the idea of "the fullest rational autonomy."[137] This ideal is in obvious contradiction with the main ideal of the Romantic movement, which is related to Herder's philosophy and said to be "expressive unity." The second ideal, which

[134] Cf. note 72 above.
[135] Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, p. 4.
[136] Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, p. 10.
[137] Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, p. 12.

expresses the desire to express what one is in terms of one's unity with nature or a specific nation, obviously clashes with the first one, which embodies the enlightened aim to be a free and absolutely independent individual.

Hegel's philosophy, now, is interpreted by Taylor as the historical attempt to bring these two ideals together in one system of thought. At the same time though, Taylor interprets Hegel's challenge as one that transcends his specific time, for the opposition that came to the fore in the nineteenth century, is an opposition that concerns modern human beings *as such*. This is due to the fact that humans are what Taylor calls "embodied subjects." Their physical constitution always already imposes certain natural demands upon them. At the same time, their spiritual constitution as subjects naturally fuels their desire for freedom. "Man is at odds with himself,"[138] Taylor writes, and this is not a historical coincidence related to the 19th century or to Hegel; it is posited as an apodictic law resulting directly from his being on this world as a human being. Yet, Hegel is taken to be the first philosopher who explicitly takes on this fundamental ambiguity and tries to come to terms with it. If we combine these statements, we start to get an idea of why Hegel, in Taylor's eyes, is of importance to us.[139]

The fact that Hegel's philosophy is of importance to us today does not mean that Taylor thinks Hegel's system presents the true and final form of the solution to the problems it addressed. Taylor will even say, more bluntly, that eventually, Hegel's system cannot convince us anymore, for both historical and (onto)logical reasons. It has become historically unconvincing because the "aspiration to unity with the all of nature" has ceased to be of interest for contemporary individuals.[140] It has always been (onto)logically unconvincing because the validity of dialectical logic itself cannot be grounded in anything else: this flaw moves Taylor to accord Hegel's arguments "the status that some moderns give Aquinas' proof of the existence of God: they cannot be seen as irrefutable, designed to convince the skeptic, but more as an expression of what the believer believes."[141]

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[138] Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, p. 20.
[139] Compare Taylor's own succinct formulation: "Hegel's work arose out of the attempt to combine the two aspirations of [the] Romantic generation, the aspiration to radical autonomy on the one hand, and to expressive unity with nature and within society on the other […] these two aspirations have remained important in our civilizations. Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, p. 69.
[140] Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, p. 139.
[141] Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, p. 67.

If Taylor abandons Hegel here, and (as we will see later on) continues to move further away from him, this does not mean he completely puts aside Hegel's vocabulary. This is because the "challenge" that underlies Hegel's philosophy (on Taylor's reading), is one that Taylor wishes to take up in his quest for the establishment of what he calls a "post-industrial Sittlichkeit."[142] This would mean taking on once more Hegel's original challenge of uniting the demands of *Moralität* and *Sittlichkeit*, but in Western communities of individuals who, living in liberal societies, have grown far more used to modes of atomistic thinking. For ignoring what Taylor calls "the demand for a modern Sittlichkeit"[143] can, in his eyes, only lead to the ultimate disintegration of Western societies.

Now one might legitimately ask at this point: why introduce here the views of a philosopher who does not necessarily seem to be related to Nabokov's text in any way? The first answer is: because I think Taylor's take on the matter offers a number of valuable insights, and helps to put the case I've been making around the two Krugs into a broader philosophical perspective. I still insist that the thisness of the individual I remains at peril in any form of Hegelian dialectics, and I take both Krugs to remind us of this point. However, that does not mean that we have to give up all there is at stake in Hegel's philosophy, and Charles Taylor, I think, offers the outline of a vocabulary that might be helpful, especially in the context of some of the more radical Marxist interpretations of Hegel, and some of the more univocal criticisms of Hegel, such as those offered by Popper.

Another contemporary philosopher who offers a fresh but somewhat more systematic take on Hegel's philosophy is William Desmond. Like Taylor, Desmond is very much aware of the flaws in Hegel's system of dialectics, some of which have already been intimated in my discussion of Krug's pen. However, like other contemporary Hegelians such as Charles Taylor, this does not mean he thinks Hegel's thought has nothing left to say to us. Desmond rejects any atomistic approach of reality, be it socially, ethically, or (meta)physically. Trying to steer clear of the two extreme positions in the debate concerning atomism and holism, individualism and collectivism, particularity and universality, he seeks to maintain a more nuanced middle position. Although he is careful

[142] Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, p. 125.
[143] Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, p. 134.

to avoid what he calls "the flattenings of atomism and social holism,"[144] he does want to keep some notion of "universality" (or wholeness) alive – just not a dialectical one: "We need, then, another idea of the universal […]. This other universal is not one term of a logical or ontological antithesis. It is the happening of the between."[145]

To see what Desmond means by this "between," we have to turn to his *Being and the Between.* Desmond differs from a thinker like Taylor in that he does not necessarily think dialectics constitutes a faulty form of reasoning,[146] but rather, just thinks Hegel's particular version of it is unsatisfactory. What is unsatisfactory about it to Desmond is not that dialectics in its absolute form reaches a wholeness which is not logically viable, but that the absolute immanence of the process leaves no room for transcendence, no room for a between where what is other to the self-determining system of the whole can effectively breathe. This is how he puts it:

> The process [i.e., Hegel's dialectics] passes all the way to complete self-determining intelligibility. It completes itself in the overcoming of the negative, which is the complete internalizing of otherness and transcendence. Put otherwise, self-transcendence, in dialectical interplay with what is other, ultimately circles around itself on the way to absolute wholeness. Or, put otherwise again, the whole becomes an absolutely self-mediating circle of transcendence within which all otherness is sublated. Then the real result is that there is no between; there is no transcendence finally; there is the absolute as thought thinking itself in its other; but the other is thought again thinking itself, hence in the end there is no real otherness either. The excess of plenitude that gives the beginning, that sustains the between, and that outlives every completion in the middle and every closed circle of concepts, is occluded.[147]

This is why Desmond wants to direct more of reason's reflection to the potential doubleness of dialectics: "We must open dialectic to the doubleness implied by its own *dia*."[148] If Taylor wants to pare down Hegel's dialectics, Desmond means to double it. Why? Because he thinks of the world and our being in it as situated in what he calls the "between": "The world as between is inhabited by a plurality of determinate entities that

[144] Desmond, *Perplexity and Ultimacy*, p. 61.
[145] Desmond, *Perplexity and Ultimacy*, p. 63.
[146] Cf. Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society,* pp. 66-68.
[147] Desmond, William. *Being and the Between*. New York: SUNY Press, 1995, p. 31.
[148] Desmond, *Being and the Between*, p. 34.

deserve the greatest attention, just in their astonishing determinate particularity."[149] This may feed our desire for a determinate (i.e., modern scientific) approach of the world, but Desmond insists that authentic human mindfulness should not lose itself in this determinate approach. For human consciousness, although drawn to determinate things, is itself indeterminate. "Being between," in this sense, means dwelling in the concavity between what is determinate and what is not. Desmond thinks the absolutist tendencies in Hegel's dialectic make that it cannot do justice to this fact, and his own metaphysics, which he calls "metaxological" (from the Greek *metaxu*, between), tries to amend Hegel's dialectics on precisely this point:

> […] metaxological metaphysics calls for what I call a *second perplexity*, beyond all determinate knowing. Astonishment before being-other is renewed, but thinking also finds itself perplexing to itself. Thought may try to think itself in this perplexity but, contra Kant and especially Hegel, it finds itself *escaping itself* again and again, escaping its own comprehensive grasp in this effort to think itself. When it thinks itself, its thinking of itself again escapes its just accomplished thought of itself. Something other to itself is at work in itself […]. In this second perplexity, thought thinks itself as other to itself.[150]

A "second perplexity" is being introduced in order to protect the final moment in the dialectic (where the original selfness and its negative other are united in a mediated selfness), against the risk of losing the particular thisness of the original self/this. Desmond's aim, by adding this second moment of perplexity to the dialectical circle, is to create a space where the particular thisness of both subject and object is safe, whilst at the same time keeping them from degrading into mere atomicity by keeping open the possibility for them to be related to the notion of wholeness.

2.5. Ultimate Perplexities: Love, Madness, Death

Desmond's way of dealing with the difficulty of Hegelian dialectics through a reconfiguration of the inner body of its ontology and thereby changing essential parts of its

[149] *Ibid.*
[150] Desmond, *Being and the Between,* p. 35.

vocabulary, is interesting in its own right. But the question that must be asked here is of course: what does it have to offer to us in relation to my proposed interpretation of Nabokov's *Bend Sinister*?

I think Desmond provides us with the kind of vocabulary that is able to deepen our understanding of what Nabokov himself, and with him many of his commentators, have called the main theme of his novel: "[…] the beating of Krug's loving heart, the torture an intense tenderness is subjected to […]."[151]

Adam Krug's tragedy is not simply the tragedy of a repressed individual condemned to live in a totalitarian state but, more specifically, that of an I who is related to a particular group of others (David, Olga, and, to a lesser degree, his friends), whilst at the same time holding strong individualistic principles over against a second group of others, embodied by a totalitarian state.

The idea of thought "thinking itself as other to itself" seems to open up an insightful way of talking and thinking about the above-mentioned relation between Krug and his dead wife, for it seems the narrator's device of shifting focalization from Krug's sensual experiences to his indirect musings can be thought of in just these terms. Krug's thought keeps breaking in upon itself in a way that is not directly related to sense-experience. The thought of his wife's death takes the form of an otherness, not outside, but right in the middle of consciousness itself. This otherness is not related to any concrete object in the world presenting itself as opposed to/over against consciousness. It is not the Proustian spasm of involuntary memory set in motion by the encounter with a *madeleine* biscuit. Recall the beginning of *Bend Sinister*'s tenth chapter:

> He got rid of her furs, of all her photographs, of her huge English sponge and supply of lavender soap, of her umbrella, of her napkin ring, of the little porcelain owl she had bought for Ember and never given him – but she refused to be forgotten.[152]

Krug's relation to his dead wife, and the way the narrator chooses to present it, is complex. It is not the matter of a simple dress of a loved one reminding us of her disappeared

[151] *Bend Sinister*, p. 165.
[152] *Bend Sinister*, p. 277.

presence. Olga's absence keeps imposing itself on Krug *in its absence*, but the fact that it imposes itself on Krug's consciousness in its absence makes up for its particular violence. This absence finds ways to introduce itself into the presence of consciousness, and the way Nabokov manages to artistically portray the tragedy of this phenomenon is nothing short of magisterial. Let me try to explain what I mean a little more concretely, by citing in relation to the fragment I just cited, one last piece of text from *Bend Sinister,* this one taken from the end of chapter seventeen:

> […] the soldiers carried Krug to the car. They drove back to the capital across the wild mountains. Beyond Lagodan Pass the valleys were already brimming with dusk. Night took over among the great fir trees near the famous falls. Olga was at the wheel, Krug, a nondriver, sat beside her, his gloved hands folded in his lap; behind sat Ember and an American professor of philosophy, a gaunt hollow-cheeked, white-haired man who had come all the way from his remote country to discuss with Krug the illusion of substance […]. Ember was trying to recall the American name for a similar kind of fir tree in the Rocky Mountains. Two things happened together: Ember said "Douglas" and a dazzled doe plunged into the blaze of our lights.[153]

These lines are placed after the scene where Krug has been confronted with his son's horrible death. The first couple of phrases seem to be in line with the description of the events that have just taken place. But then something strange happens. In the fifth phrase, Olga is introduced. The reader is confronted with a chronological impossibility: she knows Krug's wife to be dead; then how can Olga be sitting next to Krug in the car? As the text continues, however, we gradually start to suspect what is going on: Krug's consciousness dwells somewhere else, i.e., is not experiencing this drive, but one that took place in the past. In the last phrase, the reader's suspicion is confirmed when the auctorial voice shifts focus and adjusts itself to Krug's consciousness: "a dazzled doe plunged into the blaze of our lights," i.e., into the lights of the car Krug and Olga *were* driving at what we must suppose has been the night of the fatal accident that led to her being hospitalized and her subsequent death due to kidney problems. Thus, this fragment shows how Nabokov makes use of a certain narrative strategy to overcome the problem of adequately having to express the experience of a loss that imposes itself upon consciousness as both something

[153] *Bend Sinister*, p. 346.

that is radically other to it and at the same time as something that takes place at the most intimate depths of the self.

Thought breaking in upon itself, as it is presented here, in the form of a loss that imposes itself, does not entail only for Krug a moment of "second perplexity." Nabokov's strategy aims to transpose part of the experience to the mind of the reader. This is how I see it: as described in Desmond's notion of "metaxological metaphyics," there are two moments of perplexity. First, we have the breaking in on the other as other. This is what I have called, in Krug's case, "thought breaking in upon itself." In the scene cited above, it is constituted by the implicit focal shift of consciousness as it sets in and gradually develops over the course of the phrases describing the car drive(s). But once the reader has grasped this, a moment of "second perplexity" presents itself: we catch Krug's thought intruding upon itself, but at the same time, we catch ourselves, as readers, intruding upon this intrusion.

Krug is tricked by his consciousness, the reader has been tricked by Nabokov's narrative strategy, the mindful reader, "wonder-wounded hearer," is left musing in between tricks. Krug never *actually* shows any concrete signs of suffering in this scene – yet we are wondering if he *is*, reflecting on the thoughts playing in his consciousness in their relation to the series of tragic events that have unfolded. It is in this judgment, that Krug's/our second perplexity can be situated. The presence of a second perplexity in this form is continuously intimated by Krug's consciousness as presented in the text, but it is only fully realized in the interaction between Krug's consciousness and ours, between what is there in the text and what is going on in the reader's mind. To put it differently: the second perplexity is in this case one neither we nor Krug fully possess; it is one that can only be experienced as a form of shared consciousness. To put this in Desmondian terms: this is a perplexity that is not only twice perplexed, but actually metaxological in the very *locus* of its event.

What does the insight that Krug's vulnerability is intimately linked to the vulnerability of consciousness in its relation to what is other to itself entail for our earlier discussion concerning the precarious situation of the individual in relation to a whole that seeks to incorporate it? It reminds us that Krug is not the "invincible" "rock" he thought himself to be. Krug is no atom. He is taken up into the circle of his loved ones, and intimates

awareness of this in the unfinished treatise on "infinite consciousness" he has started to write. If consciousness is infinite, this implies a necessary link to what is other to it – and this is what makes up for Krug's tragedy. I think of Emerson's lamentful lines in *Each and All*: "All are needed by each one; / Nothing is good or fair alone."[154] The Sage of Concord seeks to express by this a feeling of frustration: the sounds, images and objects that used to please him in the past do not please him anymore: they have lost their particular charm, because they are now severed from that past. *These* sounds do not please the singer anymore, for being *these* sounds, they cannot be *those* sounds. In its linkage to the whole logic of a human life, memory reveals its fragility. It starts to show marks of venation, like the yellowing pages in a crumpled old book that has been read too many times. This frightens us and for fear of losing what is still left of it, we tell ourselves that we will let it be. But when it comes to our most intimate and important relations, what is other to consciousness will not accept to be left to rest, not even in consciousness's attempt of seeking refuge from this obtrusive otherness by turning into itself. In these relations, even the most rigid form of self-consciousness remains obsessed with the other it seeks to occlude.

So there *is* a whole of which Krug, for all his rock-like solidity, is still undeniably a part: the whole constituted by the relation between consciousness and time. The fractures this unity has been fraught with constitute an essential part of his tragedy, perhaps an even more essential part of his tragedy than his fraught relation to that other, more tangible whole constituted by the totalitarian state we looked at earlier.

A final consideration of Krug's relation to the violent otherness of the state must lead one to conclude that in the case of Krug's death, even Desmond's vocabulary does not offer us any means to make philosophical sense of it, at least not from the point of view of Krug. We may find a vocabulary to come to terms with the death of the other, but the I cannot possibly come to terms with its own death. For the I, as I, death is absolutely irrevocable. It is the limit where logic must hit upon itself without even the possibility of bouncing back.

[154] Cited from: Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *The Portable Emerson*. New York: Penguin Books, 1987, p. 631.

Thus Nabokov's narrator's decision to bestow upon Krug an "instantaneous madness," tragic as it sounds, might have been the only solution to avert a more absolute sort of tragedy. By taking the conscious I out of the dialectical equation altogether, Nabokov manages to liberate Krug from his tragedy up to a certain extent.[155] We may even read the narrator's gesture here as a definite rejection of any dialectical conception of suffering – placing the stress on the adjective "logical" in the narrator's contention that he saves Krug from his "logical fate," seems to allow for such an interpretation.

Ultimately, however, this would not do full justice to Nabokov's sometimes playful, sometimes serious treatment of the problem of dialectics in *Bend Sinister*, a treatment that, as I hope to have shown, is neither completely dismissive of it, nor blindly supportive. If anything, *Bend Sinister* only deepens the sense of moral and metaphysical wonder we keep experiencing when confronting ourselves to the endlessly elusive ambiguities that are at the heart of Hegel's dialectical universe, by posing several pertinent questions to those followers who have chosen to inhabit it. All the main themes of *Bend Sinister* – love, loss, madness, and the death of consciousness – transcend the scope of any particular philosopher or writer, and we would be shortsighted to try and reduce Nabokov's way of treating these themes to one definite philosophical vocabulary. Arguments do not cling to these ultimate perplexities and we cannot hope to claim them by means of conclusions. And yet – although dialectical reconciliation with loss and death may not be possible, we *can* hope to find ever new strategies to confront them. What makes Nabokov's art so exceptional, is that it offers us both such strategies, *and* the kind of confrontations that negate them.

As for the two Krugs, I won't (and couldn't) offer apodictic proof assuring the complete purity of their supposed lineage. The thin line between reasonable apomorphic variation and deceptive bisimulation has been the downfall of many a good literary critic. But then again, cladistics and phylogeny are only of secondary concern to readers, critics,

[155] It should be remarked here that the author himself thought of this question in far more univocal terms. Nabokov clearly suggests that Krug's madness is to be interpreted as a merciful event of liberation, rather than thought of a as personal tragedy. Thus, in the introduction to *Bend Sinister,* he chooses to refer to Krug's madness as "blessed" (*Bend Sinister,* p. 165), and when discussing the final scenes of the book he asserts that "the deity impersonated by me [...] experiences a pang of pity for his creature," as a result of which Krug is said to "[...] understand that he is in good hands" and "comfortably [...] returns unto the bosom of his maker." (*Bend Sinister,* p. 169).

and analysts of literary texts. I admit, however, that I do find myself indulging in the thought that, even if it did turn out that the relation between Krug and Krug was a complete coincidence, Nabokov would have at least generously chuckled at its incredible serendipity.

Chapter 3: The Idiocy of Suffering: *Pnin* and Pragmatism

3.1. Krug's Shadow

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's philosophy is notoriously sibylline. As William James, to whom I will turn shortly, once put it: "The only thing that is certain is that whatever you may say of [Hegel's] procedure, someone will accuse you of misunderstanding it."[156] Of course, those fond of Hegel may add that this only goes to underline his greatness, and counter James's slightly depreciative words with those of his intellectual mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson, who famously claimed that "[t]o be great is to be misunderstood."[157] However, not understanding a matter always makes for a good excuse for dwelling on that matter just a little longer. In fact, this "dwelling" might be one of the oldest and most essential stylistic stratagems available to the philosopher, and as such, one should not underestimate the fecundity of its hemming and hawing, notwithstanding our desire for definite answers. So let us dwell on the matter for a bit more, then – between understanding and misunderstanding, between the comment and its confirmation, between the hypothesis and its refutation.

We remember from the previous chapter that Hegel's vocabulary seemed to fall short right at the moment when we tried to exert from it a meaningful description of suffering (in its most irreversible incarnations). One suggestion we might take from this, is that a sensible critique of Hegel would be one that points a critical finger to exactly this tender spot of his philosophy. An early but probably still pertinent example of such a critique may be found in the works of William James.[158]

I will begin this chapter with a short assessment of James's philosophy in relation to that of Hegel and some of his followers. This discussion of the early pragmatist evaluation

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[156] James, William. *A Pluralistic Universe*. In: *Writings, 1902-1910*. New York: The Library of America, 1987, p. 671.
[157] Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Self-Reliance." Cited from: *The Portable Emerson, op. cit.*, p. 146.
[158] Was Vladimir Nabokov, the historical person, familiar with the works of William James? Indications exist that he did at least read James's works. Boyd mentions a connection with James in both parts of his biography. See: Boyd, *The American Years*, *op. cit.,* p. 216, where James is cited as "a favorite of Nabokov's," and: Boyd, *The Russian Years*, *op. cit.*, pp. 90-91. Cf. also *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya*, p. 311, where Nabokov mentions having read James with his father at the age of 12 or 13.

of Hegel's philosophy should lead us on in our discussion of the theme of suffering we hit upon at the end of chapter two. If that chapter focused on the philosophical problematic of particularity, the present chapter aims eventually to enter into a contiguous philosophical discussion surrounding Nabokov's works that seems intimately connected with it: the discussion concerning the extent to which we should pay attention to, and take care of, those who surround us. In more general terms, one could say that the aim of the previous chapter was to find out up to what extent a "dialectical approach" would be able to offer a viable approach to some aspects of the problematic of suffering in Nabokov's works; the aim of the present chapter, ultimately, is to see how a "pragmatist approach" might fare in a similar context. After a few more words on Krug (whose shadow, for some reason, continues to haunt the beginning of this new chapter), and some more on pragmatist philosophy in general, I will pass on to "test" this pragmatic approach through a confrontation with Nabokov's *Pnin*.

3.2. James on Hegel

We have seen how a novel like *Bend Sinister* can be read in such a way as to put a serious strain on any line of argumentation that seeks to draw any positive connection between the dialectical universe of Hegel's philosophy and the complex pluralistic universe of Nabokov's fiction. We have also remarked that even in its revised, most recent form, Hegelian dialectic still sputters when asked to make sense of some of *Bend Sinister*'s more painful and tragic moments. Charles Taylor's very balanced reappraisal of Hegel's philosophical potential for our times seemed apt to save Hegel from the flatter kinds of criticism imposed upon his thought by people like Popper, and showed us that parts of his political thought have much more to offer to us than some twentieth-century thinkers, univocally linking his name to the ravages of radical communism, want to have us believe. Yet, at the height of tragedy, even William Desmond's emendated version of doubled dialectics was unable to convince us of the sustainability of Hegel's vocabulary. The force of Hegel's explanatory model seemed to hit upon a solid wall, whereas Nabokov's Krug kept passing through an infinite corridor of suffering with an endlessly receding exit door. But where exactly, did Hegelian vocabulary fall short?

A possible answer, already adumbrated in our discussion of Desmond's version of dialectics in relation to Krug's death, might be that however ingeniously one may try to "open up" the method of dialectics to certain forms of otherness, the fact will *always* remain that dialectical thought cannot escape from what it ultimately is and offers: a finite, rationalist take on reality. We have dealt with W. T. Krug's criticizing the shortcomings of Hegel's system when it comes to dealing with particulars, and tried extending his criticism to see how it would fare in the field of more practical matters of morality. At present, I think our discussion would benefit from the addition of a new dimension and the introduction of a new group of representatives. The representatives of this group refer to themselves as pragmatists.

One of the earliest and over time most famous propounders of the philosophy of pragmatism was William James. His criticism of Hegel, taken in a very large sense, can in some ways be compared to that of Krug and Kierkegaard discussed above. Although James is not one-sidedly dismissive of Hegel's philosophy, he incessantly finds fault with what he calls Hegel's "vicious intellectualism."[159] By this James means "the habit of assuming that a concept *ex*cludes from any reality conceived by its means everything not included in the concept's definition."[160] In fact, James even praises Hegel for what he conceives of as "his vision" – the fact that there "is a dialectic movement in things" – and he makes it clear that he deems Hegel's dialectical logic to be a clear improvement from the old Aristotelian "logic of identity."[161]

Unfortunately, though, the greatness of this Hegelian vision of an ever-changing universe, of a world not once made but perpetually "in the making," cannot be aptly expressed in terms of the dialectical method according to James. Hegel greatly underestimates the manifold possibilities of his own vision because he chooses to resort to a rather lifeless "monistic" vocabulary to give expression to the lively, breathing, throbbing universe glimpsed at in his vision. And James is merciless towards Hegel for this essential flaw. He could have been more than just "one of those numerous original seers who never

[159] James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, p. 677.
[160] *Ibid.*
[161] James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, pp. 670-671.

learn how to articulate," James writes – if only he had known how to express himself after the more "pluralistic" fashion the pragmatist adheres to.[162]

The problem, as stated, is to be found with Hegel's intellectualism. Hegel may have gleaned an important truth about life in his "vision," but his rationalistic vocabulary does not allow him to do justice at all to the fundamentally pluralistic nature of life. "What really *exists*," as James succinctly puts it, "is not things, but things in the making,"[163] and an insight of this order could only be aptly formulated in and shaped through a vocabulary more pluralistic than that of Hegelianism. By seeking to transcend "the muddy particulars of experience," the rationalist philosopher may well attain ideal heights and miraculous notions of the Absolute – but to what good is all that if through his intellectualistic method he cannot bring the system of his thought to bear on practical reality anymore? James likes to cite and stress the pertinence of Kierkegaard's adage that "life has to be lived forward." It is implied that philosophy, if it is to mean anything at all to us human beings, should thus not shy away from "*the particulars of life*."[164]Any form of speculative thought that does shy away from these is void of any practical value at all to us in our forwardly-lived lives. A philosophical vocabulary that ignores the particulars by taking too "monistic" a stance, does not only miss the mark metaphysically, but puts itself at the risk of becoming what James would call "a monument of artificiality,"[165] for "you cannot redescend into the world of particulars by the Absolute's aid."[166] And this has moral consequences. "[T]he monistic philosopher," James writes:

> finds himself more or less bound to say, as Hegel said, that everything actual is rational, and that evil, as an element dialectically required must be pinned in and kept consecrated and have a function awarded to it in the final system of truth […].[167]

In opposition to the "monistic rationalist," James places the "pluralistic empiricist":

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[162] James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, p. 678
[163] James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, p. 751.
[164] James, *A Pluralistic universe*, p. 781.
[165] James, William. *Pragmatism*. In: *Writings, 1902-1910.* New York: The Library of America, 1987, p. 496.
[166] James, *Pragmatism*, p. 518.
[167] James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. In: *Writings, 1902-1910*. New York: The Library of America, 1987, p. 125.

> In any pluralistic metaphysic, the problems that evil presents are practical, not speculative. Not why evil should exist at all, but how we can lessen the actual amount of it, is the sole question we need there consider.[168]

The monistic philosopher suffers from a special mania that starts with translating "things" into "concepts," and at some point convinces himself of the need for a final concept, an Absolute, from which all the other concepts are made to take their sense. Now it may be possible to pull off such a deduction logically; however, James would argue, you will never be able to get such a conception of the universe to coincide with the reality of the actual world surrounding you. For that world is not monistic but pluralistic, and *even* if the monistic philosopher may argue (as we know he is wont to) that this plurality consists only in outer appearance, appearance to be overcome or superseded (*aufgehoben*) by rational thought, the fact will remain that *our* existence, *this* human existence, is still to be lived "as if" this plurality was actually there. "As if," from the dialectic-monistic point of view; for from the practical point of view of daily life, it makes no sense to pretend the state of affairs in the world affects us as anything else than pluralistic, as long as this is the way in which it presents (or is made to present) itself to us.

In fact, James's quarrel with what he calls monistic thought at times seems to be purely practical. He does not deny that the world may ultimately, on some level, possess a degree of synthetic unity; he just does not want to radicalize this insight and put all of the richness of thought in the shadow of some overarching single Principle. Take for example this passage in *Pragmatism*:

> Of course the world is one, we say. How else could it be a world at all? Empiricists, as a rule, are as stout monists of this abstract kind as rationalists are. The difference is that the empiricists are less dazzled. Unity doesn't blind them to everything else, doesn't quench their curiosity for special facts, whereas there is a kind of rationalist who is sure to interpret abstract unity mystically and to forget everything else, to treat it as a principle; to admit it and worship it; and thereupon come to a full stop intellectually.[169]

[168] James, *A Pluralistic Universe,* p. 686.
[169] James, *Pragmatism*, p. 543.

But how does all this reverberate on the topic of suffering? Surely, we can present a picture of things in which all "evil" exists merely on a speculative basis, and in which our personal moments of suffering are "dialectically required" in order for some final order or Absolute to continue functioning as it does – but if the notion of this Absolute is as ideally vague as it sometimes is in Hegel's dialectical idealism, then one may be forgiven for bluntly asking: why? Why should I accept *this* suffering, *my* suffering, here and now, as a *moment* of the dialectic towards an Absolute Good, if this Absolute forms the conclusion of an abstract system of thought that is not in any way connected with the concrete pangs of my suffering *hic et nunc*?

Worse, the notion of the Absolute, any notion of an Absolute, may prompt us to indulge in taking "a moral holiday" (as James puts it) when meeting with the suffering of others, or even when confronted to those forms of personal suffering that are to be overcome by us. Instead of confronting suffering head-on, the Absolute gives us an excuse to turn the other way. The notion of the Absolute cannot but fail to convince in the case of more radical forms of suffering, and to allow for the existence of suffering by way of reducing the Evil underlying it to a moment of some Ultimate Good cannot effectively silence the concrete qualms of the hopeless. Even William Desmond's attempt of doing this through his notion of the highest dialectic as "patience" and "obedience to the ultimate"[170] seems to fall hopelessly short: patience always demands a certain amount of leisure, and leisure is a luxury rarely bestowed upon the suffering subject. This is why pragmatist philosophers like James, instead of trying to come up with ever more sophisticated versions of the dialectical method, opt for a more down-to-earth alternative:

> The way of escape from evil on this system is *not* by getting it "aufgehoben," or preserved in the whole as an element essential but "overcome." *It is by dropping it altogether, throwing it overboard and getting beyond it, helping to make a universe that shall forget its very place and name.* It is then perfectly possible to accept sincerely a drastic kind of a universe from which the element of "seriousness" is not to be expelled. Whoso does so is, it seems to me, a genuine pragmatist.[171]

[170] See: Desmond, *Being and the Between*, *op. cit.*, p. 138. Desmond writes: "[…] at the limit of self-transcendence, there is a surpassing of self in patience towards the Good. There the Good gives itself out of its own excessive transcendence, radiates not for itself, but for the other. Highest dialectic is patience, obedience to the ultimate."
[171] James, *Pragmatism*, pp. 618-619.

William James does not mention Hegel by name in this passage, found towards the end of his famous series of lectures on the philosophy of pragmatism, but the vocabulary he employs seems to make it sufficiently clear against whom he is taking position here.[172] The pragmatist has no intention of explaining away evil by means of crafty dialectical reasoning or sophisticated stratagems of sublation – he simply sees no use for speculative solutions in the realm of practical problems. For all speculative approaches have a tendency to keep us circling around actual problems, instead of properly addressing them. What's worse, they tempt us into a certain forgetfulness of the actual suffering that is going on in the world, and may cause us to look the other way where (or when) we want to be vigilant. James's pragmatist attitude is more rigorous, more "down to earth," wants to take moral problems at face value, or, to use a term made famous by him, is only interested in the "cash-value" of events and propositions:

> Doesn't the fact of "no" stand at the very core of life? Doesn't the very "seriousness" that we attribute to life mean that ineluctable noes and losses form a part of it, that there are genuine sacrifices somewhere, and that something permanently drastic and bitter always remains at the bottom of its cup? [… I find myself willing to take the universe to be really dangerous and adventurous, without therefore backing out and crying "no play" […] I am willing that there should be real losses and real losers, and no total preservation of all that is. I can believe in the ideal as an ultimate, not as an origin, and as an extract, not the whole.[173]

Again, as in *A Pluralistic Universe,* James is not completely dismissive of Hegel, not even, as we might expect from a convinced pragmatist, completely averse to a notion of the ideal. What James cannot accept though, is any version of a story in which this ideal is to function as "origin" or "whole." That is to say, one should not be allowed to trace back anything going on in this pluralistic world to a principle (God, the Absolute, the Whole) that does not ostensibly form a part of it. Consequently, the "noes and losses" that we are confronted with are "ineluctable," standing "at the very core of life." The universe "really" is "dangerous," the losses are "real," the sacrifices are "genuine." The repetitiveness of James's

[172] Cf. also: James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience, op. cit.*, p. 125.
[173] James, *Pragmatism,* p. 617.

formulation serves to stress the one continual criticism he has to level against Hegel and his followers: the particularity of people, the thisness of things, the specificity of events that fill the lives of our daily existence are uniquely intransigent, and any system of thought that seeks to address them as if they were not, is doomed to be unsatisfactory, both ontologically, and, in the long run, morally.

All well and good, we might think, but besides bold words stating practical ideals and humanistic intentions to "throw evil overboard" and to create "a universe that shall forget its very place and name," what else has the pragmatist to offer? Charles Taylor has called James "our great philosopher of the cusp."[174] He did so referring to James's elaborate phenomenological descriptions of dramatic religious conversions in *The Variety of Religious Experience*, a phenomenon that need not concern us here. Yet to call James a great philosopher of the cusp makes sense in another, perhaps slightly less laudatory way, for we can interpret the formula to point, in this case, to the fact that James also often seems like the kind of philosopher who steadily leads the way to the site of the drama, the locus of suffering, and forces us to look at it plainly, directly, not allowing us to avert our eyes or even blink; but it is precisely at this point that he himself quietly begins to take his leave. We are on the cusp, James has brought us there, and this is no mean feat. But what- and whereto now?

Admittedly, James does not grow entirely silent here. He states that he wants to throw evil overboard (but wouldn't most of us want to?). He speaks of man's responsibility to frame ideals in cooperation with "at least his fellow men, in the stage of being which our actual universe has reached," and with possibly a pragmatic principle of a God, one that "works satisfactorily in the widest sense of the word"[175] – but that sounds rather vague for a philosopher who venerates the concrete. The downside of the "cuspatory" dimension of James's philosophy is exactly this: right at the moment when one would expect him to start giving actual practical guidelines for our moral lives, he disappears out of sight. And to what avail, we might be tempted to ask, is all James's criticism on the monistic blindness of

[174] Taylor, Charles. *The Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 59.
[175] James, *Pragmatism*, p. 618.

the dialectical idealist and rationalist traditions of thought, if, in the end, James himself fails to give us concrete solutions to address the moral problem of suffering?

One way of answering this question is to point to the Emersonian attitude of self-reliance that seems to underlie much of James's discourse. Reading James's criticism of the "second-hand religious life" in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*,[176] and his famous lecture on *The Types of Philosophic Thinking*,[177] we get a distinct impression of someone heavily influenced by the Emersonian cult of self-reliance on the one hand, and the continental (i.e., romantic) cult of originality on the other. Taking this Emersonian-romantic streak at the background of his philosophy into account, one could argue (or at least surmise) that if James does not offer us any concrete solutions at the end of his lectures on pragmatism, it is simply because at this point he wants us to start relying on and thinking for ourselves.

But how satisfactory can such an answer really be? After having deftly taken away the ground beneath the feet of his dialectic opponents, one gets the feeling James leaves his readers hovering in mid-air, with not much left to cling to. Of course, he may insist that we should not need a God to cover for our "moral holidays," that it is better to consciously "just take" one whenever one feels the need to. Of course, James may argue that there is no need for some high-strung sophisticated dialectic framework to keep the problems of evil, pain and suffering at bay, nor for any deeper foundation upon which to found our moralities; that all one needs to fare well in the world of morality and to deal with the ethical quandaries of the times is to cooperate (up to some extent) with our fellow men and keep in our private hearts a conception of a personal god that serves our practical needs when we need them to be served. But then, it does not seem wholly unreasonable to be somewhat skeptically suspicious of James's optimism, and ask him the old and inevitable practical question: how? And it is from the moment we start asking this question that we begin to suspect that James may have been carried away by his own optimism. For his ethics do not formulate any concrete principles at all. Thus, to many readers, it may look

[176] James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 15. Cf. also Taylor, *The Varieties of Religion Today*, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-29.
[177] James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, pp. 631-648.

like James's position amounts to drawing away from the discussion of moral questions before it has even been properly started.

3.3. The New Pragmatism: Richard Rorty

A contemporary philosopher who spent a considerable amount of time and ink countering this attitude against the pragmatist's view on morality is Richard Rorty, who liked to think of himself as a "new" pragmatist. I have mentioned the absence of concrete principles in James's moral pragmatism, and shortly presented two possible perspectives with regard to it (i.e., the Emersonian perspective, and a more skeptical perspective). Rorty's strategy offers a third perspective: instead of trying to provide a *justification* for the pragmatists' "unprincipled" attitude towards morality, he will insist, effectively, on the inherent potencies of such an attitude. *Ethics without Principles*[178] is the title of a famous essay Rorty wrote, and the phrase that most pithily expresses this philosophical position.

Rorty shares the same anti-metaphysical, anti-essentialist attitude towards the history of philosophy as James.[179] His attitude towards Hegel though – especially the younger Hegel – is somewhat more appreciative.[180] Still, Hegel's tendency not to be "content to arrange little things" and his urge to "also want to describe a big thing,"[181] must make him, in the eyes of the "new" pragmatist too, the kind of "theory-minded person" who is "tempted to relapse into metaphysics, to try for one big hidden reality rather for a pattern among appearances." [182] Rorty himself has no place in his philosophy for big hidden

[178] Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, *op. cit.*, pp. 72ff.
[179] See chapter 1 above for a brief analysis of the general aspects of this attitude.
[180] See, for example: Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, especially pp. 96-122.
[181] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity,* p. 100.
[182] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, p. 105. Cf. also p. 104, where Rorty cites the famous line closing off Hegel's *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*: "And so Germany became Top Nation, and History came to an End," and ponders on the problematic of finitude in Hegel. Although reluctant to admit the philosophical consequences of Hegel's proposition about the End of history, Rorty visibly struggles with it. He writes: "It would be charitable and pleasant, albeit unjustified by the evidence, to believe that Hegel deliberately refrained from speculating on the nation which would succeed Germany, and the philosopher who would succeed Hegel, because he wanted to demonstrate his own awareness of his own finitude through what Kierkegaard called 'indirect communication' – by an ironic gesture rather than by putting forward a claim. It would be nice to think that he deliberately left the future blank as an invitation to his successors to do to him what he had done to his predecessors, rather than an arrogant assumption that nothing more could possibly be done." The vaguely speculative nature of this rather far-fetched hypothesis and the silent irony underlying Rorty's formulation of it suggests Rorty could not have believed in it for more than a frowning minute.

realities or final truths, especially not when it comes to his moral philosophy. "The trouble with aiming at truth," he says, "is that you would not know when you had reached it, even if you had in fact reached it."[183] Yet he is quick to add:

> But you *can* aim at ever more justification, the assuagement of ever more doubt. Analogously, you cannot aim at "doing what is right," because you will never know whether you have hit the mark. Long after you are dead, better informed and more sophisticated people may judge your action to have been a tragic mistake, just as they may judge your scientific beliefs as intelligible only by reference to an obsolete paradigm. But you *can* aim at ever more sensitivity to pain, and ever greater satisfaction of ever more various needs. Pragmatists think that the idea of something nonhuman luring us human beings on should be replaced with the idea of getting more and more human beings into our community – of taking the needs and interests and views of more and more diverse human beings into account. Justificatory ability is its own reward. There is no need to worry about whether we will also be rewarded with a sort of immaterial medal labeled "Truth" or "Moral Goodness."[184]

Like James, Rorty is particularly wary of the blinding effect any abstract or (as he puts it here) "nonhuman" ideal may have on moral decision-making of actual living persons. In our assessment of moral problems, we should shun recurrence to old vertical concepts (such as "Truth" or "The Good," or even "Reality") and stick to horizontal solutions. That is to say, we should not seek for higher grounds or deeper motives when it comes to justifying our actions in this world. "Metaphors of width rather than of height or depth" are to guide us in our quest of making moral sense of the world and the events taking place in it. "Moral progress is a matter of wider and wider sympathy. It is not a matter of rising above the sentimental to the rational."[185] And by "rational" Rorty understands any moral law that would transcend a particular time or culture, in short, any moral principle. Thus, when it comes to pain and suffering, the best way to morally cope with them, Rorty seems to suggest, is not to transcend them through rationalization ("rising above the sentimental to the rational"), but, on the contrary to "aim at ever more sensitivity" to it.[186]

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[183] Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope,* p. 82.
[184] *Ibid.*
[185] *Ibid.*
[186] Many contemporary pragmatists, alongside Rorty or in his wake, have made similar points. Compare, for example: Margolis, Joseph. *Life without Principles*. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1996, p. 206, and p. 219, where he writes: "There are no moral principles, I say, just as there are no laws of nature or rules of thought.

As we can see, Rorty accepts a solid chunk of the Jamesian position here. The hostility towards rational principles, the suspicion cast on abstract concepts and the radical openness towards the future are clearly shared features. But there is also a difference between the two. Whereas James's philosophy, as I pointed out earlier, can be thought of as containing a streak of Emersonian optimism and moral perfectionism, Rorty is decidedly more skeptical: "[…] you cannot aim at moral perfection […]," he bluntly affirms. Nonetheless he rapidly adds, in the same phrase: "[…] but you can aim at taking more people's needs into account than you did previously."[187] And this addition adumbrates that Rorty, in contradistinction to James, *will* have something concrete to say about what we should aim for in the domain of morality. A few pages later this aim is worked out in more elaborate terms:

> Pragmatists think of moral progress as more like sewing together a very large, elaborate, polychrome quilt, than like getting a clearer vision of something true and deep. […] they like to replace traditional metaphors of depth or height with metaphors of breadth and extent. Convinced that there is no subtle human essence which philosophy might grasp, they do not try to replace superficiality with depth, nor to rise above the particular in order to grasp the universal.[188]

A less metaphorical rendering of the aim is expressed through Rorty's elegantly succinct credo to "substitute hope for knowledge."[189] Both citations show us Rorty in his most utopian mood. Rorty's idea of the most pragmatically viable society (it wouldn't be right to say "Rorty's ideal society"), the society which according to his prediction will have the least amount of pain and suffering (it wouldn't be right to say "Evil"), is one where individuals are not looking for one large story that binds them, for one big concept under which they

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Or, whatever we offer in the way of principles or laws or rules are artifactual posits formed within a changing *praxis*. It's the modal claim that fails, *not* the sense of "indicative" regularities. We risk no conceptual resources, therefore, that the canon dares claim – except the indemonstrable presumption of modal invariance itself. "Principles" are no more than the idealized "necessities" of the observed *sittlich* regularities of our world (or invented "improvements" of same). They are the instruments of effective ideology […]. Principles, therefore, cannot but be abstracted rules of thumb subject to the vagaries of social history." Looking back instead of forward over Rorty's shoulder, one may also spot, at the apex of a slow-moving shadow, Nietzsche's remark on "the traditional error [*Erbfehler*] of philosophers in *Human, All Too Human*, I,2.

[187] Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope,* p. 83.
[188] Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope,* p. 87.
[189] Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope,* p. 88.

may unite themselves, but where, instead, individuals try to open themselves up in such a way to other individuals so as to allow for a variety of smaller shared concepts, thoughts, feelings, and ideas to connect them. Ultimately, this should lead to a community united by a sense of morality that would resemble the "elaborate, polychrome quilt" of Rorty's description.

For many of us, however, this process of opening up ourselves to others may just be the toughest moral challenge of all, and Rorty possesses a sufficient amount of pragmatic perspicacity to be aware of this. An attitude of openness is not simply given; it is to be acquired through a confrontation with as many forms of otherness we can possibly conceive of. And one of the means that human culture provides for this, according to Rorty, is reading books – especially (it seems) those that are part of the canon of world literature. Thus, he himself does not hesitate to incorporate into his philosophical arguments analyses of novels from George Orwell to Umberto Eco, or, of writers even more deeply entrenched in the Western canon, such as Marcel Proust, Henry James, or – indeed, Vladimir Nabokov.

Before I go on to discuss Rorty's take on the moral role of the novel in general, Nabokov's novels in particular, and the ways in which he fathoms them to contribute to the moral progress of the members of communities where they are read, I want to close off this section by one last remark about the previous chapter's central character: *Bend Sinister*'s Krug. We have come a long way from Hegel's metaphysics to Rorty's new pragmatism by way of James's older version of it, so, before we pass on to the case of *Pnin*, we might as well stop in passing and ask if there is anything we could sensibly say about Krug's death from the perspective of the pragmatist? If there is, I think the proposition would run somewhat like this: the way to make moral sense of Krug's death is not by seeking to *e*xplain it in terms of a traditional vocabulary that opposes Good and Evil, Right and Wrong, Liberty and Tyranny. Nor, even, to explain it by means of a more dialectical *discours*, where we attempt to bring the traditional terms closer together by having the concrete event of "particular suffering" enter into a larger sense of "universal Good" through a process of ever more sophisticated mediation. The pragmatist response to this sort of attempt would be that, however well-meant these attempts are, they ultimately tend to be led astray by some conception of a larger Truth or Concept that will threaten to distract them from the particular moral problem at hand – in this case from Krug's actual suffering.

The pragmatist is always looking for new vocabularies that might help us to rearrange our human communities in such a way as to reduce the level of (what we conceive of as) evil in the world (James) or to prevent specific forms of suffering in specific societies from happening as much as we can (Rorty). In making this claim, the pragmatist does not argue that someone employing a Hegelian vocabulary *would* want the opposite of what the pragmatists want. What she is saying is simply that the Hegelian philosopher, due to his particular vocabulary, will, notwithstanding his focus on change and movement, be rather ill-equipped to deal with the variegated flux of ethical realities that succeed each other in concrete moral situations. Thus, Krug would pose a wholly different challenge to the pragmatist. She would not be concerned with *explaining* Krug's suffering, or determining its status, value, meaning, worth, in relation to the Whole of moral existence; instead, she would be perennially on the look-out for bits and scraps of a vocabulary that may help to make sense of such a suffering in its particularity, so that, eventually, a way may be found to either resolve it, or adapt society in such a way as to prevent such events from happening again by making sure the new (and ever to be renewed as long as mankind renews itself) ethico-social conditions don't allow for it to happen again.

3.4. Rorty on Nabokov

Richard Rorty is not just one of the many American heirs of William James. From the 1990s onwards, he has also played a central role in many literary-critical discussions amongst Nabokovians. As we have seen, there are many "general concepts" Rorty wants to bar from entering into the domain of ethical thought. Rorty has also made clear his main goal and ultimate aim: communal improvement. One of the conditions for this improvement to take place is that we take a stance of openness towards those surrounding us. Given this condition, and given the widespread factual absence of Rorty's desired attitude, it does not come as a surprise that one of the moral shortcomings that Rorty keeps hitting upon in his analysis of the present state of affairs in the world is what he calls "egotism." The term is defined as follows:

> "Egotism," in the sense in which I am using the term, does not mean "selfishness." It means something more like "self-satisfaction." It is a willingness to assume that one already has all the knowledge necessary for deliberation, all the understanding of the consequences of a contemplated action that could be needed. It is the idea that one is now fully informed, and thus in the best position to make choices.[190]

One of the moral challenges of our times is to "redeem" ourselves from this form of egotism. In order to do so, we would need to aim for "an enlargement of the imagination," for "the enlarging of oneself."[191] How? As said before, Rorty will propose that one efficient way of doing this is to start reading novels by canonical writers. Why? Because these authors offer us occasions "to be moved to a place from which a different prospect is available."[192]

This seems to be Rorty's general way of putting the matter, and I will return to these statements towards the end of this chapter. First, though, I want to take a look at what he has to say, more in particular, about Nabokov. Because long before Rorty formulated these thoughts in their general form, as bearing on the whole of the Western Canon, he formulated them in connection with the works of Vladimir Nabokov.

On Rorty's view, one of the things that concerned Nabokov most was what he calls "cruel incuriosity."[193] Cruel incuriosity is one of the negative forms egotism is liable to take. It is the vice that attracts our attention from the suffering of others, the tendency to get excessively caught up in the schemes of our own desires, longings and aspirations, to the extent that we may fail to take notice of the fact that the realization of these desires may conflict with someone else's, or otherwise negatively affect another person. This is, according to Rorty, "the form of cruelty about which Nabokov worried most,"[194] and his two main texts on Nabokov, "The Barber of Kasbeam: Nabokov on Cruelty," and an "Introduction" to *Pale Fire*,[195] cite many examples from the author's works (and life) to

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[190] Rorty, Richard. "Redemption from Egotism: Proust and James as Spiritual Exercises." In: *The Rorty Reader* (eds. Voparil and Bernstein). Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010 (2001), pp. 394-395.
[191] Rorty, *Redemption from Egotism*, p. 392, p. 397.
[192] Rorty, *Redemption from Egotism*, p. 391.
[193] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989), p. 158.
[194] *Ibid.*
[195] The first, more famous, text takes up the place of chapter seven in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (pp. 141-168). The second text, less often cited, serves as an introduction to the Everyman's Library edition of

underline this statement. The most famous example is the one figuring in the title of chapter seven in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. It concerns a line from Nabokov's *Lolita*, without a doubt his most famous novel, about the complicated "relationship" between a middle-aged European man named Humbert Humbert, and an underage American girl named Lolita. The line, on which Nabokov spent no less than "a month of work,"[196] is as follows:

> In Kasbeam a very old barber gave me a very mediocre haircut: he babbled of a baseball-playing son of his, and, at every explodent, spat into my neck, and every now and then wiped his glasses on my sheet-wrap, or interrupted his tremulous scissor work to produce faded newspaper clippings, and so inattentive was I that it came as a shock to realize as he pointed to an easelled photograph among the ancient gray lotions, that the moustached young ball player had been dead for the last thirty years.[197]

Rorty's interpretation of this line is that it "[…] epitomizes Humbert's lack of curiosity – his inattentiveness to anything irrelevant to his own obsession […]."[198] The fact that Humbert does not notice that the "mediocre haircut" is the result of the barber's emotional state, that the "tremulous scissor" has nothing to do with the barber's skills, but everything with the resurgence of thoughts of a lost loved one, would go to show that Humbert is unable to identify (let alone empathize with) the suffering of those surrounding him. Rorty puts this example on a par with other instances such as Humbert's inattention to Lolita's sobs at night and his failure to show any real concern or interest for the death of Lolita's younger brother.

This then, is *Lolita*'s "moral" according to Rorty: "not to keep one's hands of little girls but to notice what one is doing, and in particular to notice what people are saying. For it might turn out, it very often does turn out, that people are trying to tell you that they are suffering."[199] Most readers, Rorty remarks, like Humbert, will have missed the barber's personal tragedy the first time they read through *Lolita*. Similarly, many readers will have

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Pale Fire (Rorty, Richard. "Introduction." In: Nabokov, Vladimir. *Pale Fire*. New York: Random House (Everyman's Library), 1992, pp. vii – xix).

[196] As per Nabokov's own afterword to (later editions of) the novel. See: *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 316.

[197] *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 213.

[198] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 163

[199] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 164.

missed Lolita's crying at night, and few are those who may have noticed that Lolita even *had* a brother at all. In his introduction to *Pale Fire*, Rorty specifies that it is exactly this susceptibility of ours to miss these kinds of details, on which the moral enrichment Nabokov has to offer to us thrives:

> When we first read *Lolita* or *Pale Fire* or *Pnin* we laugh our way delightedly through a marvelous tale. But we emerge from the final pages of each novel rubbing our heads, worrying about whether we are all right, wondering whether we like ourselves.[200]

This is taken to be an intrinsic part of the arrangement of Nabokov's text:

> […] Nabokov arranges things so that, just when we thought that we had stepped back and found the proper standpoint from which to see his book in perspective, we get an uncanny sense that the book is looking at *us* from a considerable distance, and chuckling.[201]

It is in this way, that, as Rorty calls it, Nabokov manages to "dent" us and eventually, our reality.[202] If this may seem a little cruel on Nabokov's part, Rorty assures that we shall be in fact "all the happier and wiser for having been dented a bit." Nabokov makes us realize that the self has more than one "side": "There is the side that pities Hazel and Lolita and the side which forgets, the side which can pity Pnin's difficulties with the English language and the side that finds these difficulties royally amusing."[203] Given what we know of Rorty's quarrel with egotism and incuriosity, we can deduce the implication here: these are moments of moral oblivion. The moments where we might surreptitiously enjoy Humbert's artful phrasings and dazzling metaphors, the moments where we might indulge into laughing about Pnin's various mishaps, are the moments where we are morally on the wrong. It is at these moments that Nabokov seduces us, as it were, to forget about the fragility of characters like Lolita and Pnin, and it is only as posterior repentance in the form of pity

[200] Rorty, *Introduction*, p. xv.
[201] Rorty, *Introduction*, p. x.
[202] Rorty, *Introduction*, pp. xv-xvi.
[203] Rorty, *Introduction*, p. xvi.

that we realize our temporal moral oblivion: "we emerge from the final pages of each novel rubbing our heads, worrying about whether we are all right," Rorty dolefully muses.[204]

Rorty's story, I think, has all the clarity and conviction of a very solid argument. Yet for all its solidity, the argument does seem tainted by a slight hint of moralization. One is somehow reminded of the young boy who is taken by his parents to enjoy the spectacle of a marvelous circus parade passing through town. While the innocent boy is eagerly watching the parade, he especially enjoys the view of a clown stumbling and tripping over the oversized rags he is wearing. Alas, the person whom he thought was the jester of the group turns out to be instead a sad tramp who lost his way and has accidentally got caught up in the parade. Of course the boy is unaware that he is laughing at someone's suffering. His parents, who possible *are* aware, may chide the boy for laughing, explain to him he was not paying enough attention, reproach him for a lack of authentic curiosity. Yet many of us will wonder: does it actually make sense to frame the discussion of such an event in terms of inattentiveness and incuriosity? Would not a fairer reproach on the part of the moralistic mother or father (instead of "you did not pay enough attention") simply be: "you misjudged the situation," or "you misevaluated the course of events," or "you see, when you were laughing just now, the proper reaction would have been to show pity"? If we do stick to Rorty's vocabulary of "paying attention" here, might we not imagine the boy countering: "But I did pay attention! I saw everything and I watched his every movement! I even noticed the clown was crying actual tears!" To judge that this boy shows signs of egotism would sound rather counter-intuitive, and we surely can't condemn him for lacking in attention or imagination. He noticed everything, he only erred in correctly identifying what was going on. And that misidentification can hardly be termed a purely *moral* shortcoming; more likely, it was a socio-epistemological shortcoming, linked to lack of experience and knowledge.

If one agrees with phrasing the situation like that, Rorty's vocabulary will have to be abandoned. One would have to concede, perhaps not that Rorty is completely wrong, but at least that his way of framing the moral discussion, in terms of "imagination," "attention," "attentiveness," and "curiosity," just does not seem sufficently adequate for an ethical

[204] *Ibid.*

discussion about the moral problematic at stake. On the other hand, one might still chose to disagree with the above example and counter that it is out of place and of way too general a nature to really count for anything. To what extent is the situation sketched above really comparable (from a moral perspective) to what is going on in Nabokov's novels? And weren't we discussing Rorty's ethical beliefs in their *specific* relation to the work of Vladimir Nabokov?

In answer to these questions, and to start delving deeper into the moral problematic that has come to concern us here, let us take a closer look at one of the actual texts Rorty mentioned by name when he referred to our "laughing our way delightedly through a marvelous tale" at a moment where we may have wanted to show more moral awareness: *Pnin*.

3.5. Pnin's Predicament

Pnin tells the story of (associate) professor Pnin. Exiled from Saint Petersburg in 1918, having passed through Kiev, Crimea, Constantinople, Prague, (possibly Berlin)[205] and Paris during the 1920s and 1930s, Pnin arrived in the United States on the eve of World War II, and, at the moment we meet him, is teaching classes in Russian language and literature at a (fictive) college called Waindell. A Russian exile in an American college environment, Pnin is prone to much mockery and misfortune: he accidentally boards the wrong train, his relation to the objective world around him is fundamentally fraught, and his "verbal vagaries" in the English language cause him to be misunderstood by many of his new fellow citizens and colleagues. The moral question many critics of the novel come to ask, is: what should a proper moral reaction to Pnin's (perhaps seemingly) comic misfortunes look like? What stance are we to take towards Pnin's tribulations? Should we laugh while reading *Pnin* (most of us do, at least for a while)? Or should we pity Pnin during our reading (something most readers also come to do, at one point or another)?

[205] Pnin does not mention "Berlin" when he lists the various places where he spent time during his life (*Pnin*, p. 320). A later passage describing a clown scene attended by Pnin at Circus Busch in Berlin however, hints at the possibility of his having spent some time in Berlin as well (*Pnin*, p. 345).

Most critics eventually end up in a position similar to Rorty's. At first, they say, Pnin's misfortunes are or seem funny. Pnin falls from his chair, the reader chuckles. His incomplete command of the English language results in humorous ambiguities, the reader grins. At this point, we would still not show enough awareness (or in Rorty's parlance: be incurious enough) to notice the elements of sadness and suffering underlying some of these scenes. Brian Boyd, for example, writes: "Of all Nabokov's novels, *Pnin* seems the most amusing […] But if the opening of *Pnin* appears to ask us to hoot at the novel's hero, Nabokov suddenly turns the story about […]."[206]

So there is a point in the novel where things are turned around. In most critical descriptions, this "turn-around" is thought to take place in the final chapter of the novel, where an unexpected narratological shift occurs. Whereas the story as presented to us in the first six chapters has been told to us by a more or less unidentified third-person narrator, the last chapter sees the narrator explicitly introduce himself as V. V. Nabokov (not necessarily the author, but rather one of the characters that have been mentioned earlier in the novel). This narrator strikes us as a strangely insensitive man, someone who, moreover, seemingly tries to keep from us various details.[207] In a description of a past meeting with him during a *soirée* in Paris, the reader witnesses how Pnin warned his friends (and indirectly us) "not to believe a word" this mysterious man may have to tell about him.

In the moral assessment of *Pnin,* the key scene in this last chapter for most critics is the one that takes place the night before the day on which the novel ends. Waindell College's Russian department has been closed and Pnin, notwithstanding the versatility of his academic talents and mainly because of the egotism of his colleagues,[208] cannot be placed within another department. Pnin finds himself out of a job. The narrator, on the contrary, has just arrived into town, following up on an invitation to teach at Waindell's department of English. Staying with the Cockerell family, he is, by way of vesperal amusement, generously treated to English professor Jack Cockerell's imitations of Pnin.

[206] Boyd, *The American Years*, p. 272 Cf. also p. 278.
[207] For example the fact that he had a short-lived affair with Pnin's ex-wife, leading to a suicide attempt on her part.
[208] Thus, a professor Blorenge refuses to have Pnin on the French staff because the latter can actually speak and write French, whereas the former cannot, and is convinced Chateaubriand is the name of a famous French chef.

Coincidentally, this Cockerell summarizes in his imitation most of the main events that the reader has just read about in the preceding six chapters. The narrator's reaction to his future colleague's display is as follows:

> The impersonation was deliciously funny […]. The performance, I repeat, was magnificent, but it was too long. By midnight the fun began to thin; the smile I was keeping afloat began to develop, I felt, symptoms of labial cramp. Finally the whole thing grew to be such a bore that I fell wondering if by some poetical vengeance this Pnin business had not become with Cockerell the kind of fatal obsession which substitutes its own victim for that of the initial ridicule.[209]

As already indicated, this is one of the key fragments for people who support the sort of moral interpretation we have seen Rorty defend. The narrator's progress on this night seems to neatly summarize a version of the moral shift Rorty describes from finding Pnin "royally amusing," to starting to feel a form of "pity" for him. Brian Boyd's moral reaction to this scene seems very much in line with Rorty's. He glosses: "This distasteful sequence confronts us with *our* complicity in treating Pnin as an object of amusement."[210] Then adds:

> Nabokov first invites us to join the coziness by laughing at Pnin's expense. […] yet when he introduces himself as Pnin's friend, everything in the story starts to subside and tilt […]. On one level *Pnin* seems a simple character study of an unhappy man whose every move seems to make others laugh. But by the bold surprises of the final chapter Nabokov disrupts the novel to make us conscious of our own reactions to Pnin's plight: our images of others, our laughter at others, our pity for others' pain […]. To see others simply as figures of fun, as objects of mockery, is for Nabokov a failure of the imagination that can have disastrous consequences.[211]

This part of Boyd's critical analysis again reminds us of Rorty's stance, and when it is concluded that "[o]nly through the imagination can we mortals act with sufficient thought for another's pain,"[212] it is adumbrated that, despite the slight difference in vocabulary, Boyd and Rorty eventually draw a similar lesson from Nabokov's *Pnin*: to pay attention to

[209] *Pnin*, p. 433.
[210] Boyd, *The American Years*, p. 278.
[211] Boyd, *The American Years*, p. 279.
[212] Boyd, *The American Years*, p. 287.

others by being as imaginative/attentive as possible, thus reducing the chance of missing the signs when people are "trying to tell you that they are suffering."

Rorty's line of argument to assess Nabokov's works in general, and Boyd's moral assessment of *Pnin* on the basis of a critical reading of the text, are very convincing. Boyd's reading is rich and instructive. Rorty's argument, as I have said before, has the force of insight and clarity. Furthermore, both are very much in tune with Nabokov's own biographical remarks, and with the sort of opinions he aired in a lecture series on Cervantes' *Don Quixote* given at Harvard while he was working on *Pnin*.[213] It seems very hard indeed to disagree with both Rorty's moral wish to reduce suffering by enlarging our curiosity and imagination, and Boyd's more elaborate analysis showing how Nabokov's narrative strategy lures us into inattentive complicity. Disagreeing with Rorty would definitely put one at risk of passing for incurious and cruel. Not recognizing our complicity in laughing at Pnin would play havoc upon many or most readers' sense of honesty. And yet, notwithstanding the credibility of Rorty's and Boyd's arguments, the impression remains that there is some degree of moralizing going on in their analysis of Nabokov and his *Pnin*. One of the reasons this moralizing dimension does not completely do justice to Nabokov's text, I will now try to argue, is because certain details at the heart of the text resist any form of moralization at all.

The moral discussion we have on our hands seems to revolve primarily around two different emotional reactions to the text. On the one hand, we have amusement or laughter,

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[213] Cf. Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lectures on Don Quixote* (ed. Bowers). New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983 (Harvest paperback edition), p. 52: "Both parts of *Don Quixote* form a veritable encyclopedia of cruelty. […] [I]t is one of the most barbarous books ever penned." Also see, p. 88: "[…] the irresponsible, infantile, barbed and barbarous world of the book." See also the passage on p. 56, linking the cruelty in *Don Quixote* to the sort of egotistic forms of cruelty Rorty has in mind at the end of his introduction to *Pale Fire*. And of course the concluding words of the lecture series about the new image of Don Quixote that his lectures may have brought about: "We do not laugh at him any longer. His blazon is pity, his banner is beauty. He stands for everything that is gentle, forlorn, pure, unselfish and gallant. The parody has become a paragon." Compare, too: Nabokov's letter to Pascal Covici: "When I began writing PNIN, I had before me a definite artistic purpose: to create a character, comic, physically inattractive – grotesque, if you like – but then have him emerge, in juxtaposition to so-called "normal" individuals, as by far the more human, the more important and, on a moral plane, the more attractive one […]." (Nabokov, Vladimir. *Selected Letters 1940-1977* (eds. D. Nabokov and M. J. Bruccoli). New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989, p. 178.) For the sake of completion, and to also indicate and underline the relative precarity of building one's argumentation upon biographical indices, it should also be mentioned that in an earlier letter, Nabokov wrote rather differently about Pnin: "He is not a very nice person, but he is fun" (cited by Gennady Barabtarlo, in: Alexandrov (ed.), *Garland Companion*, *op. cit.*, p. 601).

on the other, pity for the suffering of another person. The Boyd-Rorty argument, in its simplest form, is that Nabokov tempts us, initially, into the first reaction, but, ultimately, gives us a rap on the knuckles and reminds us that, *actually*, the desired moral reaction was not amusement, but pity. Now, in the case of *Pnin*, one of the questions that could be asked is: do we get any signs that Pnin *wants* our pity? If the answer to this question proves to be negative rather than positive, then we will have to start asking ourselves if Boyd's and Rorty's moral interpretations of the novel amounts to anything more than the general biblical rule that "to him that is afflicted, pity should be shewed";[214] a rule that is not necessarily wrong, but cannot be made to apply without further argumentation. But let us see what the text has to say, and begin by looking at the matters through the eyes of our central other himself: Professor Timofey Pnin. As a concrete starting point, we may take Pnin's reaction to an article about marriage counseling:

> It is nothing but a kind of microcosmos of communism – all that psychiatry [...]. Why not leave their private sorrows to people? Is not sorrow, one asks, the only thing in the world people really possess?[215]

Pnin's attitude to the suffering of others here appears to be neither "incurious" nor "imaginative." To him, suffering and sorrow are personal affairs that have nothing to do with the question of paying attention to others. It may even be the case that "sorrow" is our one true possession in this world.

And indeed, suffering oftentimes presents itself to the self as something to which our relation is to be determined from the inside: the self longs to suffer in silence. Suffering is a private affair, and for others to interfere with it will lead to naught. What can someone else ever really come to know about "my" suffering? I can *explain* my suffering to someone else in a thousand different ways, and in consequence, she may have at her disposal a thousand different ways of imagining it – and yet I may still feel that she has not even begun to understand what *I* am suffering. For the determinate "myness" of my suffering, that which makes my suffering eminently mine, the bare fact that it is I who is suffering,

[214] *Book of Job*, King James translation.
[215] *Pnin*, p. 333.

makes for an element so radically solipsistic that I can never hope to convey it to anyone else. Any pretention to the contrary, any attempt on the part of the other to contradict or underappreciate this element of my suffering, is more likely to be considered unwarranted psychological prying or unjustified intrusion, than considerate curiosity. Scenes like the one above indicate that in Pnin's case, this element of privacy attached to suffering should at least be taken into account in our moral analysis of the novel.

Up until now, we have been approaching the phenomenon of suffering in *Pnin* by looking at the particular misfortunes of its protagonist. But next to Pnin's own misfortunes, there is another instance of suffering looming over the universe of *Pnin* that is not personally inflicted upon Pnin, but with which he is nonetheless confronted: Mira Belochkin's death. Mira, with whom the young Pnin fell in love and had a relationship, was taken away by the Nazis. The way Pnin's feelings towards the cruel fate suffered by Mira are described is important, because it gives us an intriguing insight into his own stance towards the fact of suffering:

> […] if one were quite sincere with oneself, no conscience, and hence no consciousness, could be expected to subsist in a world where such things as Mira's death were possible. One had to forget – because one could not live with the thought that this graceful, fragile, tender young woman with those eyes, that smile, those gardens and snows in the background, had been brought in a cattle car to an extermination camp and killed by an injection of phenol into the heart, into the gentle heart one had heard beating under one's lips in the dusk of the past.[216]

If we take a closer look at Pnin's attitude towards suffering here, we may note that he singularly evades all Rortyan vocabulary. His strategy is not to dwell on Mira's suffering so that he may come to pity her, or for that matter, himself, more, but rather to try and forget this suffering. Yet at the same time, as appears from the felt and precise descriptions of Mira, we can hardly say this desired self-inflicted form of oblivion lacks consideration, or is related to a form of incuriosity. In a phrase that is reminiscent of Proust's narrator's reflections on the death of Albertine, we read that "[s]ince the exact form of her death had not been recorded, Mira kept dying a great number of deaths in one's mind, and undergoing

[216] *Pnin*, p. 394.

a great number of resurrections, only to die again and again […]."[217] Pnin *is* deeply haunted by these images, and he *does* care – but it is precisely because he cares about this suffering that he feels an urgent need to forget and pass on. Conscience and consciousness are no match for this suffering, which cannot be satisfactorily addressed or explained. The implication is that to enlarge our imagination to allow for a more elaborate description of Mira's suffering will not make us more capable of understanding it, or contribute to our moral comprehension of the evil at its source. As the passage above shows, the imagination is only liable to hit upon itself when confronted to certain forms of suffering: "those eyes," "that smile," "the gentle heart" are radically irreconcilable with the fact and nature of Mira's suffering. The human imagination finds itself falling short in these cases, and this is not due to the limits of its width, but in fact *precisely because of* its unbridled imaginative capacities. All this goes only to show once more that the imagination as such is amoral. Enlarging it does not improve or reduce our capability of making moral sense of this or that form of suffering, or provide us with the means for preventing it in the future. Enlarging it only improves the variability, depth, and width of the images we may come up with. Imaginative enlargement may allow us to tell a story in more than one way, but it will not necessarily help us in forming better moral judgments of the stories we tell. "One had to forget" – but is this forgetting heartless? Is Pnin heartless when he decides this suffering asks for forgetfulness instead of pity?

Although this question does not touch directly upon a form of suffering that has been directly inflicted upon Pnin, the way one answers it has its importance for the matter that has been concerning us here. For if we decide to answer this last question in the negative, it may lead us to shift the focus of the question towards ourselves. We might then ask: does it mean *we* are heartless readers when we choose not to pity Pnin, notwithstanding what we know of the sources of *his* present suffering? Maybe not necessarily, once we take seriously Pnin's assertion about the privacy of suffering, paired with the fact that pity is an emotion that clings to experiences, things, and persons, whereas life has a tendency to hurtle on, and persons may indeed aspire at doing the same. From the way Pnin reacts to the person who attempts to bring up these memories about Mira again

[217] *Pnin*, p. 394.

("chatty Madam Shpolyanski"), it appears that Pnin is in no way interested in talking about these past events of suffering himself.[218] And this may make us wonder: can we positively say that Pnin, at any point, actually solicits the reader's pity? Is Pnin in need of our pity? Is this the sort of moral reaction he requires of his readers?

There are many scenes in *Pnin* that make us wonder if Rorty's defense of pity as the right moral attitude to take towards Pnin does not obliterate a central aspect of Pnin's character,[219] an aspect another critic, Alfred Appel Jr., has referred to as Pnin's "spirited resiliency."[220] Above, while exploring Rorty's and Boyd's arguments, I had my summary of *Pnin* end with a description of the narrator starting to express symptoms of labial cramp from laughing too much at Cockerell's imitation of Pnin. But in fact, this taut note is not the one on which the novel ends. After this, the novel contains another vital scene: Pnin leaves Waindellville to seek his fortune elsewhere. The narrator, upon learning that Pnin has been fired, has generously offered Pnin a position in his English department. But Pnin, not attracted by such a gesture of pity and in no way eager to work under V. V., vehemently refuses. At the end of the novel the narrator witnesses him taking off:

> Then the little sedan boldly swung past the front truck and, free at last, spurted up the shining road, which one could make out narrowing to a thread of gold in the soft mist where hill after hill made beauty of distance, and where there was simply no saying what miracle might happen.[221]

Michael Wood has interpreted this scene as embodying what he calls "Pnin's Revenge," defining this revenge as "an escape from pity and from comedy; a flight from the very design of the fiction […]."[222] And indeed, this last scene could very well be interpreted as a testimony to the fact that Pnin neither wants nor needs our pity. That does not mean that

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[218] *Pnin*, p. 394.
[219] Recall for example the closing scene of chapter 2, in which Joan Clements tries to "comfort" Pnin after a disastrous meeting with his ex-wife. Joan, in whose house Pnin rents a room, tries to cheer Pnin up by inviting him to "look at some pictures." Joan's pity may be honest and heartfelt, but the whole scene is pervaded by an atmosphere of belittlement and tragic misunderstandings between the two. It ends with Pnin exclaiming in utter hoplessness that he has, indeed, "nofing left." See *Pnin*, pp. 339-340.
[220] Appel Jr., Alfred. *Nabokov's Dark Cinema*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974, p. 296. Cf. also his "Exit Smiling: An Epilogue." In: *TriQuarterly*, no. 28, fall 1973: *Russian Literature and Culture in the West 1922-1972*, p. 608.
[221] *Pnin*, p. 435.
[222] Wood, Michael. *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1994, p. 163.

we should shove aside his tragic past and completely neglect some of the difficulties attached to his present position as an exiled professor – it just means that "pity" might not be the right reaction to it. Also, very importantly, we should not forget, in *our* moral evaluation of the novel, that the man at whom we find the narrator laughing directly, is not Pnin, but Cockerell, and his imitation of Pnin. The very last line of the book shifts from this scene back to Cockerell, and a line spoken by him: " 'And now,' he said, 'I am going to tell you the story of Pnin rising to address the Cremona Women's Club and discovering that he had brought the wrong lecture.' "[223] The reader will at this point recall that the narration of this event at the Cremona Women's Club is similar to the one recounted in the first chapter of the book, and might even be tempted into believing for a moment that this way of ending the book is a way of turning a linear story into a circular one. Reading the line again, however, we'll notice something strange, a slight difference that is not in accordance with the events as we have read them: for in the version of the event we have read in chapter 1, Pnin *did not* bring the wrong lecture. This was something bound to happen, but it did not, and the narrator expressed disappointment about it.

We have here a sly reminder of the fact that Cockerell's Pnin – the caricature version of Pnin – is someone who can be pitied. This pitiable Pnin is the one to whom a job is offered by V. V. The actual Pnin, however, for all his comical mishaps, has no need for such pity, and takes off to a place "where there was simply no saying what miracle might happen." In reality however, readers of the rest of Nabokov's oeuvre, *do* know what happens and *do* know where Pnin will end up: his guest appearance in a later novel, *Pale Fire*, reveals that he has become the head of the department of Russian at Wordsmith College.

To say that we should pity Pnin sounds not only moralizing, but also puts us at the risk of adopting an attitude as patronizing as that of the narrator. In fact, every time the narrator snugly speaks of "poor Pnin," one cannot help but feeling a bit uneasy. Does this attitude not have a derogatory effect? Is it not a tat complaisant? Pnin's generally violent reactions to V. V. appear to indicate that he is not at all charmed by it. Pnin's "spirited resiliency" makes that next to such exclamations of despair as "I haf nofing left, nofing,

[223] *Pnin*, p. 435.

nofing!"[224] there are as many moments that show us a more mirthful Pnin. Take for example the story of his arrival in America:

> "Examination on ship before landing. Very well! 'Nothing to declare?' 'Nothing.' 'Very well! Then political questions. He asks: 'Are you anarchist?' I answer" – time out on the part of the narrator for a spell of cozy mute mirth – " 'First what do we understand under "Anarchism"? Anarchism practical, metaphysical, theoretical, mystical, abstractical, individual, social? When I was young,' I say, 'all this had for me signification.' So we had a very interesting discussion, in consequence of which I passed two whole weeks on Ellis Island" – abdomen beginning to heave; heaving; narrator convulsed.[225]

These two weeks of captivity due to a failure in communication between Pnin and the customs officers must have been a source of some distress: we can imagine a two week-stay on Ellis Island after a long boat journey from Europe to be anything but desirable, and Pnin's self-mockery here only goes to show his ability to overcome past suffering by present laughter.

And it is not only about his past that Pnin manages to laugh: consider for example the description of his shabby habitat. We know that this habitat is all but pleasing to Pnin ("it blows from the floor, and it blows from the walls"; Pnin is annoyed by "sonic disturbance"[226]). Yet when his former wife Liza comes to visit him, he manages to brighten up the place with a joke: "this is my *palazzo*, said Jocose Pnin."[227]

Finally, there is the conversation between Pnin and his old friend Chateau, where the two joke about the rather alerting states of their respective health(s):

> Chateau, who looked so jaunty, with one hand in the pocket of his white flannel trousers and his lustring coat rather rakishly opened on a flannel waistcoat, cheerfully said that in the near future he would have to undergo an exploratory operation of the abdomen, and Pnin said, laughing, that every time *he* was x-rayed, doctors vainly tried to puzzle out what they termed "a shadow behind the heart." "Good title for a bad novel," remarked Chateau.[228]

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[224] *Pnin*, p. 340.
[225] *Pnin*, pp. 303-304.
[226] *Pnin*, p. 322.
[227] *Pnin*, p. 335.
[228] *Pnin*, p. 388.

This "shadow behind the heart" Pnin and Chateau are laughing about, as is hinted at in an earlier chapter, can be a serious source of suffering for Pnin. And yet, despite the negative implications of Pnin's medical condition, both he and Chateau manage to joke about it without striking us as particularly immoral. They are just having some good old fun among friends. If we concede that Chateau is not morally wrong here, if we concede that both Chateau and Pnin are right in making fun of his condition, does this imply that the reader, too, is entitled to a subtle smile every now and then while reading *Pnin* without being marked as "incurious" or "inattentive" to Pnin's suffering? Do we really have to condemn all the "royally amusing" elements of the story in order to safeguard our moral probity?

Nabokov himself, in a letter written to Pascal Covici in 1955, affirmed that "whatever Pnin is, he certainly is least of all a clown," and by pointing out all these mirthful scenes in the novel I do not intend to turn him into one.[229] My intention is not to argue that we should care less for Pnin and laugh more about him. What I do want to argue though, is that these moments of justified mirth in *Pnin* might hint at the possibility for a richer moral understanding of the novel as a whole. By this I mean a moral understanding of the novel that does not rigorously condemn certain emotional reactions to it (amusement, mirth, laughter), whilst unequivocally preaching others (remorse, pity). More importantly, I hope to have shown that "paying attention to the suffering and pain of others" cannot be univocally connected to these emotional reactions. To laugh is not always to be inattentive. Curiosity does not necessarily equal pity. More formally formulated: the desire for the sort of moral attitude that Rorty's pragmatism (or, for that matter, Boyd's criticism[230]) defends (i.e., openness, imagination) cannot be convincingly grounded in the fostering of one emotion (pity) at the expense of another (amusement). In the vocabulary of pragmatism: we can think of more fruitful ways of being attentive than through pity. A closer look at Pnin's character, offering a rare blend of real suffering with colorful resiliency might be one of the most convincing ways to make this point.

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[229]Nabokov, *Selected Letters 1940-1977*, p. 178.

[230] To do full justice to Boyd a more recent essay of his on *Nabokov and Humor* (where strangely enough, precious little mention is made of *Pnin*) should be mentioned here. In this essay, Boyd seems further removed from Rorty's position, and closer to the one I'm developing here. Especially his remark that "Nabokov loves and laughs at life even amidst loss" seems pertinent and relevant to our discussion, if approached from a more biography-critical point of view. See: Boyd, *Stalking Nabokov*, *op. cit.,* p. 156.

3.6. The Idiocy of Suffering

If not through pity, it might be asked, then how *are* we to take Pnin's suffering seriously? When it is affirmed that Pnin has no need or use for our pity, this does not imply a brisk encouragement to overlook his fragility altogether. For indeed, this character does represent and experience a very special kind of fragility that is particularly worthy of our interest. Our attention is drawn to this fragility on the very first page of the novel:

> Ideally bald, sun-tanned, and clean-shaven, he began rather impressively with that great brown dome of his, tortoise-shell glasses (masking an infantile absence of eyebrows, apish upper lip, thick neck, and strong-man torso in a tightish tweed coat, but ended, somewhat disappointingly, in a pair of spindly legs (now flannelled and crossed) and frail-looking, almost feminine feet.[231]

Whence the spindly legs and the frail feet? And why does the narrator think them "disappointing"? Can we relate these lines to a later instance in the first chapter when the narrator says he feels "cheated" by Pnin *not* missing his lecture at the Cremona Women's Club as we might have expected him to do?[232] Placing these two instances of narratorial disappointment in relation to the ending of the novel could provide another indication of the fact that we may think of Pnin's trajectory in the novel as one of liberation, its goal to escape the hands of an ill-wishing narrator. To a character in a novel, "his" narrator may appear as a figure of divine authority. And if that character is someone with a past similar to Pnin's, we can imagine him to be rather wary of such a God. When it is further revealed that the remarkable dictum of this narrator-god goes along the lines of "[h]arm is the norm. Doom should not jam. The avalanche stopping in its tracks a few feet above the cowering village behaves not only unnaturally but unethically,"[233] Pnin's perpetual wariness of his surroundings, the world and the people around him, does not come as much of a surprise. Pnin's relatively conflicted relationship with the world around him is in no way the result of professorial absent-mindedness: "Pnin, it should be particularly stressed, was anything

[231] *Pnin*, p. 301.
[232] Cf. *Pnin*, p. 314: "Some people – and I am one of them – hate happy ends. We feel cheated."
[233] *Pnin*, p. 314.

but the type of that good-natured German platitude, *der Zerstreute Professor.*"[234] On the contrary: the conflicted relationship is rather a result of Pnin's awareness of his fragility in a world where "harm is the norm" – in such a hostile universe a wariness of that which is other to the self is only to be expected.

The form of otherness that is most worrisome to Pnin, as one would expect with someone having lived through exile and the many losses accompanying it, is that of the past intruding upon the present. All the central instances of Pnin's suffering occurring in the novel are connected to moments of his past. One such crisis occurs relatively early in the novel, when the resemblance of a present "alley of chestnut and oak" to a pattern on the wallpaper of Pnin's boyhood bedroom (almost literally) knocks Pnin of his fragile feet and causes an enigmatic sentiment of both mental and physical unease. Overpowered by "a tingle of unreality" and an "eerie feeling," remembrance of a past fever and the experience of what resembles a present fever begin to intermingle – Pnin needs to sit down. During this strange experience, an even stranger philosophical intermezzo occurs:

> […] one of the main characteristics of life is discreteness. Unless a film of flesh envelops us, we die. Man exists only insofar as he is separated from his surroundings. The cranium is a space-traveler's helmet. Stay inside or you perish. Death is divestment, death is communion. It may be wonderful to mix with the landscape, but to do so is the end of the tender ego. The sensation poor Pnin experienced was something very like that that divestment, that communion. He felt porous and pregnable.[235]

This passage contains a first intimation of the consequences of that part of the experience of suffering that could be termed its "idiocy." To be aware of the idiocy of suffering is to be aware of the fact that the experience of suffering may strangely interweave elements of high personal tragedy with elements of incomprehension bordering the comic. There are forms of suffering that seem to us so unreal that they inspire to us a sentiment of incredulity and absurdity. What do we mean to convey when we say that something is "absurd" in this way? "Absurdity" is connected to comedy, to laughter. What is absurd makes us laugh. Yet when we say "this is absurd" in the face of suffering, we mean

[234] *Pnin*, p. 305.
[235] *Pnin*, p. 310.

something else: we are not laughing, do not think this is funny at all. And yet, we repeat: this is absurd. For there is an absurdity even to the fact that the word "absurd" shows up when we experience or witness suffering. What exactly happens here? I'm not sure. But let us stick with Pnin here, and make another point: the realization that there are elements of both personality and irrationality at the heart of the experience of suffering interferes with the possibility of sharing this experience with others.

I read these lines about the porosity of Pnin's ego and the necessity of its "discreteness" as indicating the fragility resulting from this idiocy. They express an uncomfortable possibility: the lofty discourse of otherness, pointing to the necessity of continually enlarging ourselves, of opening ourselves up to what is other to ourselves, might after all be not much more than the lofty ideals hitting upon the rigid limit of the ego. For can the self really bear the weight of otherness? Very gifted novelists like Nabokov might be able to imagine otherness in all its glorious difference, but how about us, who are but readers of fiction, not writers? *They* can turn stories of suffering into timeless novels, but what is there for us?

For us, like for Pnin, treading out of the cozy confines of the self might be accompanied by a sentiment of divestment similar to the qualms of death itself, causing us to be exposed to a feeling of the "end of the tender ego." Like many other passages in *Pnin*, this fragment hints at the uncanny possibility that our solipsism might be of a more radical nature, and that overcoming it probably entails putting ourselves (and our selves) at a considerably greater amount of risk than the pragmatist moralist has factored into his analyses. For someone who has lost as much as Pnin, the "self," or what is left of it, might be the last thing she would want to give up. That is why Pnin's present self has use for neither pitiful musings on the past, nor for the pity of others who could only remind him of precisely those things he does not want to discuss. Suffering and pain are private affairs, and all Pnin wants is for others to recognize that. Thus it makes sense that, each time the narrator (in his role of character) brings up the subject of Pnin's past, Pnin is either dismissive or outraged.

Many commentators have pointed to the radical transformation of Pnin's character in the fifth chapter of the book, and attributed this to the fact that in this chapter he is among his émigré friends. The discrepancy between Pnin's comfortable attunement to the

Russianized surroundings at "The Pines" and the alienizing environment of American academia is very salient indeed. But I would argue that the observation of this discrepancy is only part of the explanation for the remarkable surge of Pnin's spirits in this chapter. Related to the *presence* of these familiarly congenial surroundings, is an *absence.* For what is strikingly absent during most of this chapter is Pnin's painful past. In fact, it is only for as long as that which is present (the congeniality of the Émigré milieu) manages to prolong precisely this absence (the past), that this presence is able to effectuate the "transformation" just mentioned. For once Pnin's tragic past does intrude upon his consciousness again at the end of the chapter, the congeniality of these surroundings seems to evaporate. Pnin's newfound buoyancy and confidence are abruptly lost as he is reminded of his past by Madame Shpolyanski. Immediately a more tragic atmosphere creeps back in:

> […] Pnin quietly retired to a bench under the pines. A certain extremely unpleasant and frightening cardiac sensation, which he had experienced several times throughout his adult life, had come upon him again. It was not pain or palpitation, but rather an awful feeling of sinking and melting into one's physical surroundings […].[236]

The feverish sentiments described here, and which precede the transition back to a more tragic atmosphere, are very similar to the ones we saw in the scene from chapter 1 discussed above. This time Pnin's *malaise* is related to Madame Shpolyanski bringing up Mira and causing him to mentally relive the drearily imaginative thoughts connected to the death of Mira as discussed above. Of course, Madame Shpolyanski is not in any way accountable for Pnin's emotional suffering. She has absolutely nothing to do with it. But it is precisely this unrelatedness to the source and cause of Pnin's suffering here that captures my attention. For the strange fact is that she induces a moment of suffering related to Pnin's past in a way that she could scarcely have foreseen. In contradistinction to his American friends and colleagues, there is much that culturally, historically, and linguistically binds Mme Shpolyanski and Pnin. Yet the whole scene between the two is characterized by a separation and distance. Mme Shpolyanski strikes Pnin as "chatty", and instead of a feeling sharedness, the effect of the confrontation is described as "disturbing".

[236] *Pnin*, pp. 391-392.

True suffering resists all attempts of sharing. In fact, the whole scene suggests that there is no such thing as shared suffering. It reminds us that solipsism, to a certain degree, is fundamentally part of our human condition. There are attempts at sharing that separate us more deeply. Suffering demands and creates certain solitude, and any intrusion upon this solitude only causes the suffering self to retract further into the atomic core of its solitude. I am reminded here of the sheer force that goes out from a deceptively straightforward remark found in Proust's À *la recherche du temps perdu*: "chaque personne est bien seule."[237] Not only the way in which Nabokov's descriptions condense events through time in *Pnin* is redolent of Proust: the intimation of the truth that when it comes to suffering, we are all, in a way, irreducibly alone, has a Proustian ring to it as well.

Let me quickly recall the passage from Proust I'm referring to, for in order to understand the full force of the phrase just cited, we have to take a look at the context in which it appears. The scene is as follows: Marcel (Proust's narrator)'s grandmother has been suffering for a while from a bad case of uremia, and Marcel, being worried about his grandmother, has taken her to a doctor. After having given Marcel's grandmother a check-up, the doctor has some bad news to bring: she is about to die. While giving Marcel this prognosis, he suddenly breaks off the explanation:

> « Excusez-moi, » me dit-il en voyant entrer une femme de chambre qui portait sur le bras l'habit noir du professeur. « Vous savez que je dine chez le Ministre du Commerce, j'ai une visite à faire avant. Ah ! la vie n'est pas que roses, comme on le croit à votre âge. » Et il me tendit gracieusement la main. J'avais refermé la porte et un valet nous guidait dans l'antichambre, ma grand'mère et moi, quand nous entendîmes de grands cris de colère. La femme de chambre avait oublié de percer la boutonnière pour les décorations. Cela allait demander encore dix minutes. Le professeur tempêtait toujours pendant que je regardais sur le palier ma grand'mère qui était perdue. Chaque personne est bien seule. Nous repartîmes vers la maison.[238]

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[237] Proust, Marcel. *Le côté de Guermantes*. Paris: Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), Tome II, p. 318. For reasons indicated in note 413 below, all citations from and references to Proust over the course of this thesis will be primarily to this French edition of his work.

[238] *Ibid.* English translation: " 'Excuse me,' he broke off as a maid came into the room with his coat over her arm. 'I told you, I'm dining with the Minister of Commerce, and I have a call to pay first. Ah! Life is not all a bed of roses, as one is apt to think at your age.' And he graciously offered me his hand. I had shut the door behind me, and a footman was shewing us into the hall when we heard a loud shout of rage. The maid had forgotten to cut and hem the buttonhole for the decorations. This would take another ten minutes. The Professor continued to storm while I stood on the landing gazing at a grandmother for whom there was not the slightest

This scene expresses exactly what I mean by saying that the experience of suffering contains a core that is inaccessible to others, and which no form of psycho-analysis or of pragmatist imagination will ever help us get (in)to. The way Proust slyly inserts his "chaque personne est bien seule" between the sentimentally eventful « le docteur tempêtait encore pendant que je regardais sur le palier ma grand'mère qui était perdue » and the outrageously dry « nous repartîmes vers la maison », lends a tone to this insight that adds to its force. It is not just Proust's grandmother who is said to be "alone". All three of them, including the doctor and even the narrator himself are said to be fundamentally "alone." The implication seems to be that, during these special moments, which are at once awkwardly comical, deeply tragic, and charged with a pervasive atmosphere of strangeness, we are thrown back into ourselves in a way that makes us realize that there is a solipsism that reaches deeper, and that these depths will not be probed by anyone,

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hope. Each of us is indeed alone. We started for home." (*The Guermantes Way,* transl. C. K. Scott Moncrieff, 1925, public domain).

Compare also the narrator's remark somewhat further on, on p. 338: "Ce n'est pas que le duc de Guermantes fût mal élevé, au contraire. Mais il était de ces hommes incapables de se mettre à la place des autres, de ces hommes ressemblant en cela à la plupart des médecins et aux croque-morts […]." This analysis proves to be endowed with the gift of foresight, for during the last scene of *Le Côté de Guermantes*, the duke indeed reveals himself to be exactly the kind of person the narrator thought him to be (for once): Swann has just made it clear to the duke's wife that he is dying, and she finds herself in a moral quandary. She knows that she should show more extensive consideration to Swann and the fact that he is dying, but at the same time, a dinner at the princess is waiting. Luckily for her, the duke, who apparently is not as struck by the news as his wife, is more action-minded and making a perfunctory excuse to Swann stating that they are already late, urges his wife to hurry up and get into the coach. But at the moment the Duchess gets into the coach, the duke notices she is wearing the wrong color of shoes and this appalls him to the point where all of a sudden being in time for the dinner is no longer of the essence – Oriane should go back upstairs and put on a different pair of shoes. The book notoriously ends with the Duke and the Duchess taking off, and the duke shouting to Swann ("d'une voix de Stentor"): "Et puis vous, ne vous laissez pas frapper par ces bêtises de médecins, que diable ! Ce sont des ânes ! Vous vous portez comme le Pont-Neuf. Vous nous enterrez tous !" (p. 597). Of course, Swann's state is nowhere near as vigorous as that of the Pont-Neuf, and he will die not much later, as the doctors predicted and as he vainly tried to explain to the duke.

Finally, to round off this rather longish note, I want to remark that there is another phrase in Nabokov's oeuvre that shows an interesting family resemblance to Proust's notion of solitude; I'm referring to a remark made by Lolita: "You know, what's so dreadful about dying is that you are completely on your own." (*The Annotated Lolita*, p. 284). Lolita's remark, in its turn, seems to evoke another interesting philosophical intertext, namely that of Blaise Pascal's darkly ironic or faintly tragic (Pascal always leaves us guessing as to whether he is smirking or wincing at us) insight that "one dies alone" ("on mourra seul"). Cf. Pascal, Blaise. *Pensées : Opuscules et lettres* (ed. Sellier). Paris: Garnier, 2011, p. 246 (fragment 184) : "Nous sommes plaisants de nous reposer dans la société de nos semblables, misérables comme nous, impuissants comme nous. Ils ne nous aideront pas. On mourra seul. Il faut donc faire comme si on était seul."

whatever his or her intentions may be. At these moments, the hope "to be moved to a place from which a different prospect is available" [239] seems either laughable or preposterous, for here we are at the hands of a suffering that unexpectedly laughs in the face of pity and wearily turns away in the light of laughter. It is indifferent to the amusement or mourning of others because it only communes with the self. It speaks no human language and will not be addressed by any. Its idiom is made up of silences and blanks instead of sounds and letters. To put it less pretentiously: the suffering self simply wants to move on, and whatever "curiosity" or "attention" the other might show to it is bound to be addressed to the "wrong self." Like Pnin, this self's aim is not to be pitied nor to be laughed at, it just wants to get away to a new place, where the world may speak to it again, where what is other to the self loses its hostility again, to a place "where there is simply no saying what miracle might happen," that is, to a place where one can trust again in the *possibility* of such miracles, and regain a form of trust in the benevolence of what is other to the self.

Again, it wouldn't be necessarily wrong to propose one should feel pity for someone like Pnin. But to imply that this could bring about an actual moral difference might be to overestimate the effect of the other on the suffering self; for one of the things that defines *this* self, is that it is, in essential ways, closed off to the other. Paying attention to it, or adapting a stance of curiosity towards it might, like it does in Pnin's case, only aggravate the suffering. Of course, pity will prove the right reaction to suffering sometimes, and of course, making fun of it sometimes will make it worse – but the case of Pnin shows that there also is a much deeper complexity to the phenomenon of suffering and the possible attitudes we might take *vis à vis* this phenomenon. The idiocy of suffering makes that, sometimes, there is just no telling beforehand. It is a noble idea to think that the world would be a more morally desirable place if only we paid a little more attention to one another, but the idiosyncratic nature of each person's suffering makes that this kind of proposition is just too general to convey any true argumentative force when it is applied to a phenomenon that is thoroughly pervaded by idiocy. On the intensified level of privacy which forms the scene of suffering, laughter and tears, joy and rage, tragedy and comedy intermingle. The *idiocy* of suffering, is that, at the height of its force upon us, we just don't

[239] Rorty, *Redemption from Egotism*, p. 391.

know how to properly react to it: whether we should laugh at it, cry at it, or just be silent. All we can tell for sure that there is an intimacy to this experience that will not allow for the touch of others, whether this touch be hostile or friendly. This is the paradoxical fragility, the pregnability, the porosity, referred to in *Pnin*: a momentously overwhelming feeling of frailty and brittleness that refuses to interact with all that is other to it.[240] "Paradoxical," because just when the self is at its most *inward,* just when it is completely withdrawn within itself, furthest from all that is other to it, the feeling of porosity to the other is at its most intense, the other seems to loom nearer than ever, and the possible threat it poses to us has never been more vividly experienced.[241]

3.7. Concluding remarks

There is nothing necessarily wrong with Rorty's desire for moral progress by means of heightened attentiveness to the concrete suffering of others instead of through an obsessive relation with obsolete idealized big concepts (Truth, Good, Righteousness etc.). Complications arise when we start to interrogate the envisioned distance from this world to a better world. The connection Rorty makes between a set of still rather general attitudes (pity, amusement, curiosity) and individual moral progress (or regress) is not as straightforward as he supposes it to be. The main reason for this, I think, is that although he follows James in shifting from abstract rationalization to addressing concrete problems, he fails to really address the deeper questions surrounding the problematic of suffering itself. The concepts of suffering, amusement, curiosity, and pity are never really elaborated in his philosophical analyses: Rorty uses them in a broadly commonsensical manner, and at times, one gets the impression that when used this way, their supposed concreteness is not that far removed from the more abstract terminology used by non-pragmatist philosophers. The gap between the words and what they are supposed to refer to remains

[240] This feeling might also be described as the negative counterpart of the religious experience of gracefulness. When the believer is overwhelmed by an inexplicable wave of gracefulness, and is suddenly convinced of the ultimate benevolence of what is other, the result is often the conveyance of renewed trust in the otherness of the universe. The suffering subject on the other hand, will experience something exactly contrary to this renewal or renewed confirmation of trust. Her suffering is liable to make her wary of all that is other, less trustful of those surrounding her.
[241] Cf. *Pnin*, p. 310.

unbridged. Pnin's case goes to show how important it is to pay attention to the complexity of the phenomenon of suffering – one has to know what something like suffering consists in, feels like, before one can even start to formulate possible moral reactions to it.

So, dispelling Rorty's moral reaction, can we think of a better one? On the basis of our analysis of *Pnin*, I would suggest that if there is anything we could possibly want to offer to the suffering self, if there is anything Pnin seems to crave, it is not pity, but freedom. Of course no person can simply "give" freedom to another person like one would hand a drink to someone who is thirsty. One cannot consume freedom like one consumes a drink of water, or possess it like one possesses one's suffering. Freedom inevitably retains the character of a promise. And sometimes (not always), paradoxically, to "give" someone her (or his) freedom, may just mean to abstain from giving her (or him) anything at all. If there is a moral stance to take towards Pnin, I would say that our safest bet is to make this stance to contain the least possible amount of moralizing: not to say that Pnin teaches us to pity other people's pains and to refrain from laughing at their suffering, but to try and "give" him what Nabokov finally gave him at the end of the novel: the opportunity to escape from both.

Against Rorty's pragmatist ethics and his application of it to Nabokov, I have taken the example of *Pnin* to try and show where I think it hits upon its limits. The main difference between Rorty's approach and the one presented here, is one of stress. Broadly put, Rorty argues that the path which would lead to a reduction of suffering in this world is one that runs from the espousal of a certain form of attentiveness that reaches out to the suffering self. My argument has been that as long as you define this attentiveness in terms of difference or otherness, your optimism is liable to blind you to one of the bare facts of the experience of selfhood, which is that, in the sense adumbrated by Proust, we are ultimately alone. I have also tried to argue that this truth of a solitariness that runs deeper is closely connected precisely to the experience of suffering or our confrontation with it in the form of mourning. To argue, like Rorty, that one could actually *reduce* suffering in the world by paying a little more attention to it, is not necessarily saying something that is completely untrue, but it is dodging the argument at the essential moment. Putting things bluntly, we could say that this sort of argumentation presents a – very noble – wish for an actual cure.

Considering the matter at face value, in the simplest of terms, we would have to admit that no amount of attentiveness or curiosity to others actually could produce the magic effect of relieving them from their suffering. Attentiveness and curiosity would at the very most make us perfectly informed spectators. From a moral perspective, we are confronted with the need to specify which forms of attention or attentiveness we want, and which ones we intend to shun. And even when we do this, for example by preaching such attitudes as pity or (non-)amusement, we are still liable to fall short as I have tried to show with the example of *Pnin*. Neither pity nor laughter seemed an adequate reaction in this case. The fact that this is so points to a considerable blind spot in Rorty's argumentation.

There seem to be instances of suffering that are fraught with a feeling that I have called the idiocy of suffering: instances where the self is permeated by a sense of fragility that inspires a hostility towards anything that is other to it. We have seen the description of this feeling of absolute fragility in Pnin's case, and we have seen the kind of desire it prompted: this suffering was not to be addressed with either pity or laughter, either well-meant or ill-meant; it was to be escaped from. And if an escape from the old self is what one wants, it only makes sense that any *static* form of attention from others, in the form of such shopworn emotions like pity and mockery, is to be interpreted as obnoxious prying; it produces the kind of vexation Pnin expresses when he asks: "why not leave their private sorrows to people?" On a higher moral plane, there simply *is* no right or wrong reaction to Pnin's suffering, if the choice is between pity and laughter. Not because there is anything wrong with these responses *in se*, but because of *whom* they are addressed to. Both are addressing to *the wrong self*. These reactions are both addressed to the self Pnin is trying to get rid of, is seeking to escape. Be they well-intentioned or ill-intentioned, these reactions, by addressing, so to speak, the wrong self, are bound to be unwelcome: they are reminding the suffering self of someone he or she does not want to be anymore. In that case, attentiveness may cause not a world that is better, or more open, but on the contrary, a world where relations between people are more tense, where the relation between the self and the other becomes increasingly fraught with a lingering sense of deepened frustration on both sides.

All this should lead us to believe that the keywords in this discussion are not pity and amusement, attentiveness and incuriosity, but time and change. I agree completely

with Rorty when he points to the need for continually reinventing our vocabularies, and to the primacy of the imagination in matters of morality. But I think what he forgets to say is that the vocabularies *themselves* should be of a certain kind. I suspect the reason Rorty says precious little about the form these vocabularies should take, is linked to his philosophical preoccupation with the ideas of difference and openness. The past, however, always imposes some form of closure upon the present, and even though life must be lived forward, it can only be judged backward.

Does that mean we have to end this chapter on a tragic note? Not at all. Let us not forget Pnin's "escape from pity and comedy," as one of the critics we cited put it.[242] Let us not forget that Pnin eventually managed to slip through the hands of his malevolent God. This "escape" does not have to be formulated in terms of "revenge."[243] Another critic's assessment of Pnin's "spirited resiliency" offers a more convincing characterization,[244] for beyond pity and beyond laughter, beyond tragedy and beyond comedy, there is resilience.

Pnin's resilience is exactly the opposite of revenge. Resilience falls right between bad conscience ("It's all my fault") and resentment ("it's all your/their fault"). Resilience opposes to these attitudes something like: "I don't know whose fault all this is, but I know I will somehow overcome the suffering it causes me."

We recall William James reproaching the dialectician for his failure to authentically recognize what he called "the fact of no." Resilience, then, would be the attitude that follows up on William James's exhortation to do justice to "the fact of no," to prevent the "no" from simply being sublated by the "yes" in order to end up with a higher "Yes." That would be a solution in which the facticity of the "no" is misrecognized, a solution in which life itself is done an injustice. At the same time, resilience does in no way simply stop at the fact of no. It cannot content itself with simply pointing at evil, then lean back again and take its "moral holiday." Some element of the dialectics has to be retained in the attitude of resilience; the element that strives to overcome, to go beyond.

This is where the full complexity of the paradox presents itself, for now resilience seems to ask from us to overcome what cannot be overcome. But maybe this paradox is

[242] Cf. Wood, *The Magician's Doubts*, *op. cit.*, p. 163.
[243] *Ibid.*
[244] Cf. Appel Jr., *Nabokov's Dark Cinema*, *op. cit.,* p. 296.

precisely what resilience consists in: the perseverance to surmount that which presents itself as insurmountable. If suffering resists all dialectical mediation, and the self, in order to progress, in order to find its way out of the labyrinth of suffering, has to rely, paradoxically, on some such form of mediation, the challenge seems well-nigh impossible indeed. But this is exactly in line with what our experience tells us about suffering: it *is* rough, it *can* present itself as insurmountable, it *does* cause us to lose our way, and it *will* reduce us to an idiotic fragility that we had not fathomed before. Resilience, then, is the paradox to which the self clings in the face of suffering. It is the faithless faith that tells us not to despair of our own fragility, when our porosity to otherness is at its violent highest, and our trust in it at its very lowest.

Chapter 4: Transparent Things and Material Minds

4.1. Nabokov, Bergson, and Berkeley

Ever since Nabokov listed Henri Bergson as one of his top favorite writers during an interview with Alvin Toffler in 1963, literary critics have tried to establish philosophical connections between the novels of the American writer and the treatises of the French philosopher.[245] The most obvious place to start looking for Bergson's influence is in Nabokov's *Ada*, which contains a complete section on the nature of time and relativity, written by the novel's main protagonist and fictional philosopher-scholar Van Veen. As has been pointed out, some of the thoughts and concepts expressed in Van Veen's fictional essay, entitled *The Texture of Time*, can be made to converse fruitfully with pages from Bergson's early work on the metaphysics of temporality in *Matière et mémoire*, or with the argument he develops against Einstein's theory of relativity in his *Durée et simultanéité*.[246] In a broader sense, some critics have tried to extend the Bergsonian dimension of *The Texture of Time* to *Ada* as a whole, or even to Nabokov's oeuvre in its totality. Thus, John Burt Foster Jr. lists Bergson as a significant source for the conceptions of time and memory as presented in a great many of Nabokov's books.[247] This attention to the themes of time and memory is soon to shift to an even broader attention for Bergson's general metaphysics and its possible role in Nabokov's philosophical formation.[248]

Leona Toker, in a general account of Nabokov's relation to Bergson, focuses on some of the central tenets of Bergson's *L'Évolution créatrice* and tries to link these to some of the novelist's works by claiming that "Nabokov seems to have shared Bergson's awareness of

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[245] *Strong Opinions*, p. 43. What must have strengthened these critics in their convictions, is the remarkable fact that Bergson figures as the only philosopher on the list, which, otherwise, is composed of poets and writers of fiction.

[246] See, for an elaborate account of these issues, Brian Boyd's chapter on "The Mysteries of Time" in his *Nabokov's Ada: The Place of Consciousness*. Christchurch: Cyber Editions Corporation, 2nd edition, 2001 (1985). For the connection with Bergson, see his notes on pp. 330-331. For another short assessment of the relationship between Bergson and Nabokov as viewed by Boyd, cf. *Russian Years*, *op. cit.*, p. 294.

[247] See: Foster Jr., John Burt. *Nabokov's Art of Memory and European Modernism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993, pp. 83-87.

[248] See, for example: Toker, Leona. "Nabokov and Bergson on Duration and Reflexivity." In: Grayson et al. (eds.). *The Shape of Nabokov's World*, *Volume I*. Basingstone: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, pp. 132-140.

the difficulty that lies in the attempts to distinguish authentic vision from aberration, mysticism from morbidity."[249] Michael Glynn, in a lengthy study of Nabokov's ties with Bergson and the Russian formalist tradition, works out this claim in more detail. According to Glynn, "a central tenet of Bergson's philosophy is that man is deluded."[250] He sums up a series of passages from Bergson's work to show that, whether it be by memory, intellect, or our tendency to assimilate our perception of reality to suit our specific practical needs, man is a creature that keeps deluding itself. Glynn then finds that Nabokov's work is pervaded by a similar delusiveness: "Nabokov's protagonists often conform to the pattern outlined by Bergson. They mold things according to ideas of their own, they see before them only what they are thinking of, reality bows to their own imaginations."[251]

I think Toker and Glynn have both unearthed an important aspect of Nabokov's storytelling when they are pointing to his characters' tendency for being "deluded," either by others, by themselves, or by the way Nabokov positions them in his fictional worlds. Yet, as so often with studies of influence, the difficulty resides in convincing us that it was indeed Bergson who inspired Nabokov to craft his deceptive universes the way he did. Glynn's claim that by "molding" the surrounding world to "ideas of their own," Nabokov's characters are following a "pattern outlined by Bergson," may come across as rather narrow: at least a dozen other philosophers in the history of Western thought (not to mention their Eastern confrères) have expressed similar views, and one could easily "prove," following the same criteria, that Nabokov's "philosophy of delusion" has nothing Bergsonian to it, but points, rather, to the influence of someone like Bishop George Berkeley.

In fact, this claim too has been advanced. A recent study by Dana Dragunoiu seeks to demonstrate that the universe of Nabokov's *Ada* is informed as much by George Berkeley's concepts of time, memory, and matter as by those of Bergson.[252] Like the Nabokovians arguing for a Bergsonian interpretation of *Ada*, Dragunoiu departs from a

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[249] Toker, Leona. "Nabokov and Bergson." In: Alexandrov (ed.), *Garland Companion, op. cit.*, p. 370. Cf. also her chapter on "Nabokov's Worldview" in: Connolly, Julian W. (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 232-247.
[250] Glynn, Michael. *Vladimir Nabokov: Bergsonian and Russian Formalist Influences in His Novels*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 77.
[251] *Ibid.*
[252] Dragunoiu, Dana. *Nabokov and the Poetics of Liberalism*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011.

suggestion made by Nabokov himself. Reacting to a critic who had sought to compare him with Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges in an essay on *Ada*, he states:

> […] I owe no debt whatsoever (as Mr. Leonard seems to think) to the famous Argentine essayist and his rather confused compilation "A New Refutation of Time." Mr. Leonard would have lost less of it had he gone straight to Berkeley and Bergson."[253]

To this is added a piece of historical evidence according to which Nabokov must have come across discussions on and references to the Bishop's arguments in *The Development of the Monist View of History*, a book that played an important role in the history of Russian Marxism,[254] and which Nabokov studied while researching his novel *The Gift*. After these biographical leads, there is a juxtaposition of central tenets from Berkeley's philosophy with passages from *Ada* that serve to defend the claim that *Ada*'s fictional universe has an important source in Berkeley's idealist philosophy.[255] The fact that Berkeley was an important philosophical predecessor for Bergson neatly fits into the story as well, for this allows for an incorporation of the earlier claims concerning Nabokov's Bergsonism into Dragunoiu's argument on the importance of taking into account Berkeley's philosophy when we want to understand more fully the metaphysics of *Ada*. In an attempt to synthesize the two philosophers' influence on Nabokov, Dragunoiu affirms that "Nabokov's familiarity with Berkeley's philosophy should be mediated by Bergson."[256]

The story about Nabokov, Bergson, and Berkeley that these critics have developed is historically and biographically convincing. The main question in this chapter is to investigate if and how the above claims concerning Berkeley's and Bergson's influence on Nabokov can be made to reverberate with an analysis of one of his later novels. This novel, entitled *Transparent Things*, has not yet been discussed in the context of Berkeley's or Bergson's philosophy. Yet despite the absence of any biographical or historical evidence

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[253] *Strong Opinions*, pp. 289-290. For Jeffrey Leonard's essay, see: "In Place of Lost Time: *Ada*." In: *TriQuarterly*, no. 17, 1970: *For Vladimir Nabokov on his seventieth birthday* (eds. Newman and Appel Jr.), pp. 136-146.
[254] Dragunoiu, *op. cit.,* p. 194.
[255] In Dragunoiu's own words: "Considered from a philosophical perspective, Terra's capacity to invade the minds of Antiterra's insane seems like a fictional representation of Berkeley's immaterialist cosmology." (Dragunoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 194.)
[256] Dragunoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

pointing to any specific philosopher's influence, this novel, too, seems to contain some interesting connections with a philosophical line of thought that spans from Berkeley to Bergson. Without any explicit intentions to establish proof of a Bergsonian or Berkeleyan influence on Nabokov, the present chapter aims to explore this line of thought. It is not just the actual contents of the conversation between these three giants that are of interest to us here, but also the mellow drum, the residual hum that hovers around that conversation. Before actually turning to *Transparent Things*, however, let us first take a look at some general aspects of the philosophy of Berkeley and Bergson.

4.2. From Berkeley to Bergson, from Bergson to Berkeley

Berkeley's philosophy presents us with a radically idealist view of the universe. The only "things" to really exist in this universe are "ideas," which, in fact, should not be conceived of as things, but rather as "images of things."[257] Not unsurprisingly perhaps, this view caused Berkeley to be derided by a great number of his fellows. Leibniz, whose philosophy (as shown by John Dewey)[258] actually shares great similarity on this point with Berkeley, once remarked:

> As for him in Ireland who questions the reality of "bodies," he seems neither to offer what is rational, nor sufficiently to explain his own ideas. I suspect that he is one of those men who are desirous of making themselves known through paradoxes.[259]

But Berkeley was not one to be put off his thoughts easily, and despite mockery and disdain from other philosophers, it is without the shadow of a doubt and perfect poise that he contends: "The only thing whose existence we deny, is that which philosophers call matter or corporeal substance. And in doing this, there is no damage done to the rest of mankind,

[257] See, for one of Berkeley's many formulations of this thought: Berkeley, George. *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, paragraph 33. (All further quotes are taken from the 1998 Oxford University Press edition, edited by Jonathan Dancy. References are to paragraph numbers.)
[258] Dewey, John. *Leibniz's New Essays Concerning the Human Understanding: A Critical Exposition*. Chicago: Scott Foresman and Company, 1902 (1888), pp. 176-178 and p. 198.
[259] Cited by Dewey, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

who, I dare say, will never miss it."[260] If we are liable to be shocked by words like these, Berkeley argues, this must be due to certain habits of speech that have become engrained in our commonsensical understanding of the world:

> But, say you, it sounds very harsh to say we eat and drink ideas, and are clothed with ideas. I acknowledge it does so, the word *idea* not being used in common discourse to signify the several combinations of sensible qualities, which are called *things*; and it is certain that any expression which varies from the familiar use of language will seem harsh and ridiculous. But this doth not concern the truth of the proposition, which in other words is no more than to say, we are fed and clothed with those things we perceive immediately by our senses. The hardness or softness, the colour, taste, warmth, figure, and such like qualities, which combined together constitute the several sorts of victuals and apparel, have been shewn to exist only in the mind that perceives them; and this is all that is meant by calling them *ideas,* which word if it was as ordinarily used as *thing*, would sound no harsher nor more ridiculous than it.[261]

Berkeley is quoted here at some length to show that his view is in fact less eccentric than it is often made to appear. Berkeley's statement is to be read in the context of his discussion with Locke and Descartes about the source(s) of knowledge, and his point is simply that if human knowledge is *only* to be gained through the senses (not an unfamiliar or radical stance), then we have no grounds whatsoever upon which to assume the existence of such mysterious material substrata as "things." Contending that all we actually have mental access to are immediate images of the world, it seems to Berkeley indeed extravagant on the side of the *materialist* to presuppose a rigid material substratum of our ideas, when it is so very clear that our senses do not offer us anything but immediate ideas. Berkeley asserts that it would in fact make more sense to simply assume that the things in this universe actually are what our senses *directly* tell us they are, i.e., wholly spiritual entities, or, ideas. His famous formula, "*Esse* is *Percipi*,"[262] neatly summarizes this thought, expressing that

[260] Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge*, par. 36.
[261] Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge,* par. 38.
[262] Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge*, par. 3.

only ideas are perceptible, and that if we insist upon perception being the cornerstone of truth, then only *they* can be safely granted existence.[263]

Taking a leap of almost two centuries, we find in Bergson's *Matière et mémoire* a more problematized account of the subject. Bergson also affirms that the material world can *only* be construed as a series of images, but he directly contradicts Berkeley's "*Esse is Percipi*" when he stresses that "[…] une image peut *être* sans *être perçue.*"[264] In Bergson's version of reality, there *is* a meaningful distinction between the actual presence of an image and its representation, between matter and its conscious perception. The common error regarding the two terms of the opposition is to think of the second as *adding something* to the first, to assume that the representation of an object is or contains somehow "more" than the object by itself. In reality, according to Bergson, our representation of an image is *less* than that which it represents. Our perception of matter *subtracts* something from it. This is how he puts it:

> Or, voici l'image que j'appelle un objet matériel ; j'en ai la représentation. D'où vient qu'elle ne paraît pas être en soi ce qu'elle est pour moi ? C'est que, solidaire de la totalité des autres images, elle se continue dans celles qui la suivent comme elle prolongeait celles qui la précèdent. Pour transformer son existence pure et simple en représentation, il suffirait de supprimer tout d'un coup ce qui la suit, ce qui la précède, et aussi ce qui la remplit, de n'en plus conserver que la croûte extérieure, la pellicule superficielle.[265]

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[263] A thought upon which Berkeley seems to have concluded already during his teens. In one of his early notebooks ("Notebook B"), Berkeley had jotted down: "Nothing but ideas perceivable." See: Berkeley, George. *Philosophical Works: Including the Works on Vision, a New Theory of Vision and Other Writings*. London: Dent, 1975, p. 256.

[264] Bergson, Henri. *Matière et mémoire : essai sur la relation du corps à l'esprit*. Paris: Alcan, 1917 (1896), p. 22. All references to Bergson's works are to the original texts in French. Although we are not out to establish any direct links or relations of "influence" between Nabokov's text and those of Henri Bergson here, it still makes sense to base one's critical analysis of Bergson's works on their original French version in the context of this thesis, for it was the original French version of the texts Nabokov himself was most familiar with. For the sake of readerly convenience, however, English translations to all block citations will be provided in the accompanying notes.

[265] Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*, *op. cit.*, p. 23. English translation: "Now, here is the image which I call a material object; I have the representation of it. How comes it that it does not appear to be in itself that which it is for me? It is because, being bound up with all other images, it is continued in those which follow it, just as it prolonged those which preceded it. To transform its existence into representation, it would be enough to suppress what follows it, what precedes it, and also all that fills it, and to retain only its external crust, its superficial skin." Source: Bergson, Henri. *Matter and Memory* (transl. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer). New York: The Macmillan Company, 1929, p. 28.

The difference between "a present image" (or matter) and its representation (or perception through consciousness) is that a present image is always part of an endlessly interconnected series of other images, and that a representation, which can never be made to contain this interwoven infinity, necessarily consists in but a minute portion of an image. A representation of an image is attained by clipping it from this sequence, by "suppress[ing] what follows it, what precedes it, and also all that fills it […]." A representation is thus conceived to be the "exterior crust," the "superficial film" of an image.

Reality, for Bergson, is characterized by an almost infinite complexity. Every single image of which the real is made up is constantly traversed by the stream of modifications taking place around it, and is constantly forced to "react" to the totality of other images that "act" upon it. To move from the level of these images teeming with activity to the level of a representation, a process of conversion is needed:

> Je la [i.e., the image] convertirais en représentation si je pouvais l'isoler, si surtout je pouvais en isoler l'enveloppe. La représentation est bien là, mais toujours virtuelle, neutralisée, au moment où elle passerait à l'acte, par l'obligation de se continuer et de se perdre en autre chose. Ce qu'il faut pour obtenir cette conversion, ce n'est pas éclairer l'objet, mais au contraire en obscurcir certains côtés, le diminuer de la plus grande partie de lui-même, de manière que le résidu, au lieu de demeurer emboîté dans l'entourage comme une *chose*, s'en détache comme un *tableau*.[266]

Note here that Bergson, to describe the conversion from image into representation, again has recourse to a vocabulary that plays on the opposition between surface and depth. To get our representations, we need to "isolate the envelopes" of objects. Like the earlier description of representations as "exterior crusts" or "films," these "envelopes" are gotten at by a process of subtraction. These envelopes, to combine Bergson's words in this last quote with the passage previously cited, are filled to the brim with potentiality. In the

[266] Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*, pp. 23-24. English translation: "I should convert it into representation if I could isolate it, especially if I could isolate its shell. Representation is there, but always virtual – being neutralized, at the very moment when it might become actual, by the obligation to continue itself and to lose itself in something else. To obtain this conversion from the virtual to the actual it would be necessary, not to throw more light on the object, but on the contrary to obscure some of its aspects, to diminish it by the greater part of itself, so that the remainder, instead of being encased in its surroundings as a thing, should detach itself from them as a picture." Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, *op. cit.,* p. 28.

process of converting them into representations, the envelopes are rigorously emptied of their contents; the envelope, a lightweight residue, is then detached from the much heavier image-as-thing.

But, it might be asked, why and how do we, as human beings, make the distinction? How can we tell the "envelope," the "film," the "exterior crust," from the "filled" object that presents itself as a temporal sequence, a series of images endlessly stretched out over and in time? How is the selection made? To get a grasp on this, Bergson's notion of living beings as "centres d'indétermination" needs to be taken into account. By saying that living beings are centers of indetermination, Bergson intends to point out that they are attuned to the images around them in a special way:

> Or, si les êtres vivants constituent dans l'univers des « centres d'indétermination », et si le degré de cette indétermination se mesure au nombre et à l'élévation de leurs fonctions, on conçoit que leur seule présence puisse équivaloir à la suppression de toutes les parties des objets auxquelles leurs fonctions ne sont pas intéressées. Ils se laisseront traverser, en quelque sorte, par celles d'entre les actions extérieures qui leur sont indifférentes ; les autres, isolées, deviendront « perceptions » par leur isolement même.[267]

Living beings are undetermined in the sense that they are free to make a selection among the images presented to them. The process of conversion from images to representations is led and defined by this freedom. This is what allows Bergson to connect his theory of representation with his theory of freedom by saying that: "Notre représentation des choses naîtrait donc, en somme, de ce qu'elles viennent se réfléchir contre notre liberté."[268] Yet it has to be kept in mind that this indetermination cannot be equated to any absolute form of freedom: the process of conversion is prompted by our undetermined nature, but it is also

[267] Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*, p. 24. English translation: "Now if living beings are, within the universe, just centers of indetermination, and if the degree of this indetermination is measured by the number and rank of their functions, we can conceive that their mere presence is equivalent to the suppression of all those parts of objects in which their functions find no interest. They allow to pass through them, so to speak, those external influences which are indifferent to them; the others isolated, become perceptions by their very isolation." Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, pp. 28-29.
[268] Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*, p. 24.

prompted by a pragmatic impulse. What is stripped from the image is that which is indifferent to us; what is retained is that which attracts our interest.[269]

Thus for Bergson there is, as mentioned earlier, a meaningful distinction between matter-images on the one hand, and perception-representations on the other. Reflecting on what Bergson has to say on the subject of this distinction, we might be tempted to conclude that his ontology and epistemology differ radically from Berkeley's thoughts on perception and matter. And if we take the outcome of both thinkers' thoughts at face value, we do seem to hit upon an undeniable difference: for Berkeley matter does not exist, only perceptions do; in Bergson's universe, matter has a higher degree of existence than perception (which can never be more than a subtraction). But to stop at this difference would be to overlook a deeper connection between the two philosophers.

An important remark Bergson adds to his reflections on images and their representation is that "[…] il y a pour les images une simple différence de degré, et non pas de nature, entre *être* et *être consciemment perçues*."[270] Taking this statement seriously, the road from Bergson to Berkeley at once seems open again. For although the matter-image is said to be "more" than its representation, if the difference between the two is only a "difference of degree" and not a "difference in nature," we may infer that Bergson deems matter-image, after all, to be *ontologically* on the same plane as perception-representations. And it is exactly this "co-extensiveness" of matter and perception that allowed someone like Gilles Deleuze to point to Berkeley as an important predecessor for Bergson.[271] For could we not read Berkeley's affirmation that nothing really exists but ideas, as equating more or less to Bergson's assertion that matter is to be conceived of as a series of images?

A good reason for accepting such an equation can be found in the account Bergson himself gives of the Bishop of Cloyne, in an essay entitled *L'Intuition philosophique*. The terms he uses to describe Berkeley's idealism here are strongly reminiscent of some of the passages in *Matière et mémoire* that have just been discussed – this is what he writes:

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[269] Cf. Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*, p. 25: "La réalité de la matière consiste dans la totalité de ses éléments et de leurs actions de tout genre. Notre représentation de la matière est la mesure de notre action possible sur les corps ; elle résulte de l'élimination de ce qui n'intéresse pas nos besoins et plus généralement nos fonctions."
[270] Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*, p. 25.
[271] Deleuze, Gilles. *Le Bergsonisme*. Paris: PUF, 1968 (2nd édition), p. 34.

> Ce que l'idéalisme de Berkeley signifie, c'est que la matière est coextensive à notre représentation ; qu'elle n'a pas d'intérieur, pas de dessous ; qu'elle ne cache rien, ne renferme rien ; qu'elle ne possède ni puissances ni virtualités d'aucune espèce ; qu'elle est étalée en surface et qu'elle tient tout entière, à tout instant, dans ce qu'elle donne.[272]

This passage seems to play a central role in assessing Bergson's relation to Berkeley, and Deleuze must have had it in mind when he affirms that Bergson "congratulates" Berkeley "to have identified matter and idea" ("d'avoir identifié corps et idée").[273] The question is: is Bergson really "congratulating" Berkeley here or is he merely *explaining* Berkeley's philosophy by means of translating it into his own vocabulary? It seems like the latter is the case. On the one hand, Bergson does clearly indicate that for Berkeley "matter is coextensive to our representation," which would indeed attune Berkeley's idealism to Bergson's own affirmation in *Matière et mémoire* that there is only a "gradual" difference between matter and its representation. On the other hand, looking a little closer at Bergson's vocabulary here, something odd must strike us: the metaphors of depth and surface he uses to describe Berkeley's idealism are very similar to the ones Bergson uses in *Matière et mémoire.* The oddness, then, resides in the fact that the terms Bergson employs to describe matter, are the terms he used to describe representation in *Matière et mémoire.* Remember that according to Bergson it were representations that were *things* stripped of what "filled" them. Representation was the lightweight envelope emptied of the heaviness of content, the thin residual layer of film extracted from it. And now here we have Bergson attributing precisely these very same qualities – to matter itself.

The only way to make sense of this is to assume that Bergson is not necessarily "congratulating" Berkeley here, but rather that he is "translating" and "transforming" him. Bergson must have been somehow aware that it is formally impossible to attribute to Berkeley the thought that matter *is* representation, for in Berkeley's universe there is no such thing as "matter" at all. Only ideas can be said to exist, and thus, everything that exists,

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[272] Bergson, Henri. *La pensée et le mouvant*. Paris: PUF, 1946 (1934), p. 127. English translation: "What Berkeley's idealism signifies is that matter is coextensive with our representation of it; that it has no interior, no underneath; that it hides nothing, contains nothing; that it possesses neither power nor virtuality of any kind; that it is spread out as mere surface and that it is no more than what it presents to us at any given moment." Source: Bergson, Henri. *The Creative Mind* (transl. Mabelle L. Andison). New York: The Philosophical Library, 1946, pp. 135-136.

[273] Deleuze, *Le Bergsonisme*, *op. cit.*, p. 34 and note.

exists in and for the mind only. The first thing that the reader needs to be aware of, then, is that Bergson here uses the term matter in an idealistic sense, analogously with his statement the material objects are, ultimately, images.[274] The other thing to be aware of, is that there is a subtle difference between saying that the *being* of things consists in their *being perceived*, as Berkeley did, and saying, like Bergson does, that matter and representation are on the same ontological plane. The former statement precludes the existence of unperceived matter, the latter leaves ample room for it.

Thus, what Bergson says about matter here *only* makes sense if one completely takes out of the equation Berkeley's very specific notion of "ideas." And this is what Bergson does: he foregoes Berkeley's strict definition of what ideas are. It is only when we take into account the fact that Bergson does not follow Berkeley's strictness here, that we can understand how Bergson can claim at all that Berkeley's "matière" (read: idea) is but a "surface" with "nothing underneath," and without any "interior." If all "matière" there is are but image-sequences (according to Bergson's terminology) or Ideas (according to Berkeley's terminology), the only things we can ever have access to in our encounter with the world are immediate perceptions. A universe that is composed of *only* such perceptions must be, from the standpoint of Bergson, a universe where all that can be said to really "be" are transparent, surficial entities. A little further on in his text Bergson specifies that:

> Il me semble que Berkeley aperçoit la matière comme *une mince pellicule transparente* située entre l'homme et Dieu. Elle reste transparente tant que les philosophes ne s'occupent pas d'elle, et alors Dieu se montre au travers. Mais que les métaphysiciens y touchent, ou même le sens commun en tant qu'il est métaphysicien : aussitôt la pellicule se dépolit et s'épaissit, devient opaque et forme écran, parce que des mots tels que Substance, Force, Étendue abstraite, etc., se glissent derrière elle, s'y déposent comme une couche de poussière, et nous empêchent d'apercevoir Dieu par transparence.[275]

[274] Cf. the passage from *Matière et mémoire*, p. 23, as cited above.

[275] Bergson, *La Pensée et le mouvant*, *op. cit.*, p. 131. Emphasis in original. English translation: "It seems to me that Berkeley perceives matter as a *thin transparent film* situated between man and God. It remains transparent as long as the philosophers leave it alone, and in that case God reveals Himself through it. But let the metaphysicians meddle with it, or even common sense in so far as it deals in metaphysics: immediately the film becomes dull, thick and opaque, and forms a screen because such words as Substance, Force, abstract Extension, etc. slip behind it, settle there like a layer of dust, and hinder us from seeing God through the transparency." Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

Again, we have here the same sort of vocabulary as in *Matière et mémoire* ("pellicule," "écran"). But this time the "pellicule" is not what is left of "matière" (as a series of images) in our representation, but it is matter (again: "matière," series of images) itself, which is now said to be transparent. Again, instead of equating Berkeley's notion of *idea* with perception, Bergson reverses Berkeley's formula to the extent that "the *esse* of things is their being perceived," and turns it into a formula according to which the perception of things is all they are. This reversal causes the qualities of perceptions to be homonymous with the qualities of matter (the series of images out there). This is still not something with which Berkeley's actual words can be made to agree – Bergson's interpretation can only be explained by taking into account his own views on matter and representation.[276] The vocabulary of "mince pellicule transparente" reveals that what Bergson is actually doing here is to equate Berkeley's concept of *idea* with his own concept of *matière* as a series of images. It is this perhaps willful confusion of terms that allows Bergson to look at Berkeley's universe as a "transparent" universe.

It is unclear if Berkeley's idealistic world, wholly composed of ideas, would have had the transparency Bergson attributes to it. But once it is assumed that Berkeley's "ideas" are like Bergsonian matter, and that besides these ideas (or that matter) there can be nothing else, one may indeed start to ponder the hypothesis that the world is in reality pervaded by a sort of transparency that allows us a glimpse of God, if only we can keep ourselves from interposing obstructing terms such as substance, force, extension, etc. This transparency would not be a result of some sort of transcendently mediated form of knowledge, but simply the result of a heightened consciousness of that which is, and the nature of that which is. The brand of idealism advocated by Bergson (and attributed by him to Berkeley) does not have to look to some beyond to find its God or Truth – rather it brings them into the nearer scope of the here and now through a thoughtful reappraisal of the distances and relations between man and his surroundings (the self and what is other to it).

There is another important aspect to this last passage from Bergson which has yet to be discussed. This "aspect" of Bergson already shines through in his own ontology as

[276] It is admitted by Bergson on the very same page that we'd be hard-pressed to find anything like this formulation in Berkeley himself: yet another indication of the fact that Bergson is not so much "congratulating" Berkeley as transforming and redescribing him.

presented in *Matière et mémoire*, but is given us more explicitly here. We could call it Bergson's "pragmatist side," or more specifically, his "transparent tendency." Just as the American pragmatists,[277] Bergson often conceives of intelligence as an organ of selection, picking out those elements of experience which are most useful to it with regard to the course of action we wish (or sometimes are forced) to take. The explanation is to be found in our intelligence's love affair with simplicity: "notre intelligence est éprise de simplicité."[278] But these are commonsensical observations. Their interest, though, lies in the fact that Bergson seems to have been so impressed by the ultimate insight of these statements that he seeks to extend them from the domain of practical philosophy into the realm of metaphysics.

We could already glean this from his observation (in *Matière et mémoire,* cited above) to the effect that the procedure of conversion from images to representations is governed by a principle of functionality. However, Bergson expresses himself even more clearly in the passage on Berkeley and the transparency of matter. For in these lines we find the pragmatist insights reunited with Bergson's own ontological insights. The transparency of Berkeley's matter (which is like Bergson's translucent envelope or representation) should come as a sort of practical bargain to us, if only we could adjust our minds to the consequences of its validity. The insight that nature is a surficial affair, that the objects around us are envelopes, that the top layer of reality is made of translucent film, is already constantly and clearly brought home to us by the evidence of our senses – we just need to get around common sense and traditional metaphysics that have been cramming the envelopes and obscuring the film.

In both Berkeley's and Bergson's eyes, traditional metaphysics was wrong to taint the simplicity of reality by obscuring it with terms like "form" and "substance." To Berkeley, the travesty is metaphysical and consists in the fact that common sense (following Descartes and Locke) has created illusions of depth and distance, granted *actual* existence to the figments of matter and substance, on the whole obscuring to us the surficial

[277] A detailed account of the relation between Bergson's philosophy and American pragmatism can be found in: Ferguson, Kennan. *William James, Politics in the Pluriverse*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007, pp. 51-73. For a general appreciation of the pragmatist philosophy by Bergson himself see his prefatory essay to the French translation of the works of William James: "Sur le pragmatisme de William James. Vérité et réalité" (1911), reprinted in: Bergson, *La Pensée et le mouvant*, pp. 239-251.
[278] Bergson, *La pensée et le mouvant*, p. 240.

simplicity of Nature and the existence of God. For Bergson, who is less prone to deny the concrete existence of matter in this sense, these metaphysical misconceptions imply a more practical drawback, touching the process of "conversion" from matter-images to perception-representations. Berkeley's criticism of substance is similar to Bergson's criticism of wrongful conceptions of representation, and there is an overlap between Berkeley's metaphysical problems and Bergson's pragmatic problems. The process of conversion from matter to representation, as Bergson describes it, is dictated by functionality, but takes place most efficiently when the "envelope" (the representation) that comes out of it is least heavily filled, is most like the ideal translucent film he found to be the pervasive element in Berkeley's universe.

The "lighter" the representation, the more readily useable it is for action, and in Bergson's universe, where truth is movement, life, and action, this implies that the best or truest representation of reality is always the most translucent representation of it. A mind filled with representations that are too bulky, that retain too much of the heaviness of matter, would not be able to function at all. It would filter reality in such a way as to make it impossible to efficiently act upon it. Such a mind would literally be overloaded with matter. We could call such a mind a "heavy mind."

This probably sounds more exotic than it really is. Most of us will in fact be rather familiar with the experience of such a heaviness of mind. Think of a first day passed in surroundings that are unfamiliar to us: the mind has been confronted with images it has not seen before and is at a loss to transform the images into complacent representations; instead of our usual series of smooth and silent representations we are left with a bulky amassment of perceptions that have not been adequately processed yet. This bulk "weighs" on the mind, which is still configured for the more limber layers of film it usually deals with. We fail to fall asleep after such days, and ask ourselves if we ever will in this strange new place. New doubts, old fears: what are we doing here anyway? When we finally do manage to fall asleep, our dreams are much more vivid than usual, the mind still busy processing, still busy "thinning out" and "limbering up" these representations so that the next day they may serve us more efficiently. The process may carry on for a couple of days, for a week, maybe. After that, all our representations are as sprite and agile and translucent as they ever were, and we can set about carrying out our daily business as we were used to.

No more mental weightlifting before going to sleep; dreams dwindle to their regular colors and contours again. The mind has appeased itself – we have made ourselves at home in a new place.

Why go to such great lengths discussing all these metaphysical and epistemological subtleties? And what do they have to do with Nabokov and *his* works*?* From a biographical-critical perspective, it could be argued that Nabokov himself must have spent considerable time reflecting on these same issues whilst crafting some of his later novels, and that it may thus considerably add to our understanding of these novels if we were to do the same. As already indicated at the beginning of this chapter, historical evidence for this has been brought forward by critics like Dragunoiu, Boyd, and others. But as stated multiple times before, such biographical-critical argumentation is not in line with the conversational interests I have defended in the first chapter of this thesis. In what follows, I do intend to improve our understanding of a particular philosophical hum that seems to underlie Nabokov's *Transparent Things*. However, it is not my intention to focus too much on the factual evidence concerning Nabokov's personal preoccupation with the ontological themes just presented and his possible interest in what Berkeley and Bergson specifically had to say about them. Rather, I want to direct our attention to what can be *added* to the discussion of these themes themselves when we try to bring them in connection with (a particular interpretation and exploration of) the novel *Transparent Things*. And once we bring these questions concerning ontology and epistemology into conversation with Nabokov's text, it will become clear that their realm extends beyond that of metaphysics, right into the domain of ethics and morality.

4.3. Transparent Things in *Transparent Things*

I have finished my section on Berkeley and Bergson with a few words on the heavy mind. Now, the phenomenon of the heavy mind is a relatively anodyne phenomenon. As said, most of us will be familiar with it. But there is another phenomenon not altogether different from it that I think plays a significant role in Nabokov's 1972 novel *Transparent Things*. In relation to the heavy mind, we could call it the overweight mind (in the sense of a mind that is overly weighed upon). It is a mind that has been inundated with matter-image,

and as such finds itself in what I will come to call a "cataractal" state, with an emphasis on the double sense of the word cataract: it can be used to refer to a condition where the lens of the eye is obscured, or as a synonym for the word waterfall. The cataractal mind, then, is a mind overflowing with a deluge of image-matter; a mind that is at some point, in some way, obscured or obfuscated by this inundation.

Bergson's onto-epistemological description of the process of conversion from matter-images to representations assumes that it always takes place relatively smoothly. The fact that the human mind is conditioned by pragmatic impulses on the one hand and a striving for simplicity on the other hand, is what keeps the process running regularly. Nabokov's novel *Transparent Things* however, shows that the process is *not* necessarily self-evident, and can be much more irregular and complex. To find out about the possible consequences of such irregularity, we will now turn to the novel itself.

Transparent Things, the shortest of Nabokov's English-language novels, relates the story of American Hugh Person and centers around the four visits he makes to Switzerland. On the first of these visits, Person ("pronounced 'Parson' by some"),[279] at that time a twenty-two year old college student, loses his father, who dies from a stroke while trying on a new pair of trousers in a fitting cabin at a local clothing store. Ten years later, a second visit follows. Hugh, now a proof-reader for a large New York publishing firm, is sent to talk about business matters with one of the firm's authors, Mr. R., and, on his way to the meeting, on a train somewhere between Thur and Versex, encounters a woman named Armande. Hugh promptly falls in love with Armande, and, after a series of persistent attempts, eventually manages to win her over. Armande is visibly not as fond of Hugh as he of her, but she does end up accompanying him back to America. They get married, and despite Armande's glaring unfaithfulness, Hugh seems happy and content. Another visit to Switzerland takes place, again to visit Mr. R., who, as the attentive reader will find out eventually, is not just a character in this story, but also its narrator (this *is* a Nabokov novel). After this third visit, Hugh and Armande return to their New York apartment, where a tragic series of events is about to unfold: Hugh, who has long suffered from a combination

[279] This phonological oddity seems in some way obliquely connected to the discrepancy in pronunciation between the last name of George Berkeley (pronounced Barkeley) and the name of the college named after him in California (written and less exotically pronounced Berkeley).

of sleep-walking and strange trance-like visions, accidentally kills Armande by strangling her over the course of one of his intensified dreams.

After eight years have passed between prisons and psychiatric institutions, Hugh Person is released and travels back to Switzerland to revisit the places he visited with Armande. Hoping dead Armande might "visit" him there, he decides to spend the night in a hotel room where she and he passed their first night together. But Hugh is out of luck once more: the hotel catches fire that night and after an unfortunate concatenation of events, Hugh fails to get out of his room and dies of asphyxiation.

What does this seemingly straightforward story have to do with the ontological musings on matter and its representation discussed above? To find out, we have to look at the novel in somewhat more detail. Glimpsed for the first time on the cover of the book, the adjective "transparent" pops up repeatedly over the course of the story. These instances can be thematized in various ways and be made to align with a number of equally credible interpretations. Thus, Michael Wood argues that the transparency of things in the novel is a reminder of the *pathos* and finite nature of human existence.[280] Donald Barton Johnson, building upon remarks made by Nabokov himself, reads *Transparent Things* as a ghost story and concludes that the transparency of things in the novel's world is indicative of a translucent boundary between the realm of the dead and the living.[281] These interpretations and others seem viable enough, each offering valid ways of making sense of what's going on in Nabokov's novel – but I want to offer here a reading that is more in line with the thought of the two philosophers I have discussed.

Sixteen people die over the course of the 26 relatively short chapters that make up *Transparent Things*, and I will come to the two most explicitly tragic ones in a moment.[282] But I want to pick up the story in the midst of things, at chapter 13, to look at one of those instances where the adjective "transparent" seems (upon first reading) to be carelessly dropped by the narrator in a description of the mountain resort town of Witt, where a good part of the action of the novel takes place:

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[280] Wood, Michael. "Nabokov's Late Fiction." In: Connolly, Julian W. (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 207, p. 212.
[281] Alexandrov (ed.), *Garland Companion*, *op. cit.*, p. 725, pp. 731-32.
[282] As Donald Barton Johnson has remarked, only three of these deaths occur "on stage." Johnson, D. B. "Transparent Things." In: Alexandrov (ed.), *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, p. 727.

> Now we have to bring into focus the main street of Witt as it was on Thursday, the day after her [i.e., Armande's] telephone call. It teems with transparent people and processes, into which we might sink with an angel's or author's delight, but we have to single out for this report only one Person.[283]

This one Person, of course, is Hugh Person. But what does the narrator mean when he says that the street Hugh is on "teems with transparent people and processes"? We get our answer not long afterwards, if we take care to read closely the following scene, where Hugh runs into Armande and her friend Julia in a local café:

> An adjacent customer, comically resembling Person's late Aunt Melissa whom we like very much, was reading l'*Erald Tribune.* Armande believed (in the vulgar connotation of the word) that Julia Moore had met Percy [i.e. Hugh Person]. Julia believed she had. So did Hugh, indeed, yes. Did his aunt's double permit him to borrow her spare chair? He was welcome to it. She was a dear soul, with five cats, living in a toy house, at the end of a birch avenue, in the quietest part of – interrupting us with an earsplitting crash an impassive waitress, a poor woman in her own right, dropped a tray with lemonades and cakes, and crouched, splitting into many small quick gestures peculiar to that woman, her face impassive.[284]

A prosaic encounter, maybe spiced up somewhat by the fact that Hugh is about to sit down at a table with a woman he has met "in the vulgar connotation of the word." But what makes this scene interesting takes place at the outer margins of the action – Hugh asks a fellow customer for a spare chair and his consciousness wanders off the scene because it is captured by memories of a late aunt. Our reading consciousness, too, is forced to make an unusual mental maneuver, when it tries to process the phrase "She was a dear soul, with five cats, living in a toy house, at the end of a birch avenue, in the quietest part of […]." We thought we were going to get a description of the person in the café who is lending Hugh a chair, but as the description develops we get confused: how would Hugh know these things about a person he has never met? Then it hits us – right around the moment when the narrator interrupts the scene with the clatter of a falling tray, our consciousness, too,

[283] *Transparent Things,* p. 518.
[284] *Transparent Things*, p. 519.

interrupts itself: of course, this is not a description of the person present in the café we are reading, but a description of Hugh's aunt mentioned a few lines earlier.[285]

A cleverly composed scene, where consciousness is thrown up against its own limits by means of a narrative strategy not unlike the one we saw Nabokov use earlier in *Bend Sinister*.[286] But what about the link between this scene and the one just preceding it concerning the transparent people and processes teeming in the streets of Witt? In this café scene, there is no mention of the adjective "transparent." And yet it can be explained through the phenomenon of transparency.

Before Hugh entered the café, we were looking at the world from the narrator's perspective; from this perspective, things, people, processes, were transparent. Now, however, as we enter the café with Hugh, the perspective changes. A simple fellow customer *obfuscates* the transparency of both our and Hugh's representation of the world. Hugh's and our attention is diverted away from what is taking place in the present because it is clouded by images from the past. Resorting to Bergsonian vocabulary we could say that an error in the process of conversion from image-matter to representation takes place here. The image of the person who borrows the chair, her "surface" is not adequately "isolated" from the depths of what "preceded," and Hugh's representation is blurred because it retains too much of the richness of the initial sequence of images. Instead of a clear representation of the lady present at the café, we are stuck with a representation of a wholly different person not in the least connected to the present scene. But we don't have to restrict ourselves to Bergson's vocabulary or my interpretation of it here; we can turn directly to the words of the narrator for an explanation in even more precise terms. The previous scene from chapter 13 may be connected to the opening scene of the novel, where the narrator explains:

[285] What makes this passage even more interesting is that the "we" and the "us" mentioned in it seem to have more than one possible referent. For *whose* consciousness is it, exactly, that is "interrupted" when the text reads "[...] interrupting us [...]"? Is it the consciousness of the narrator, R. ? Is it Hugh's consciousness? The reader's consciousness? The consciousness of the "Novices" mentioned on the first page of the book? All of the above? None of the above? Nabokov's text seems to be construed in a way that allows for all these possible readings.

[286] See chapter 2, section 5 above.

> When *we* concentrate on a material object, whatever its situation, the very act of attention may lead to our involuntarily sinking into the history of that object. Novices must learn to skim over matter if they want matter to stay at the exact level of the moment. Transparent things, through which the past shines![287]

Note especially the presence of the verb "must" here, implying that there is something imperative about this need of ours to stay on the surface of things, to prevent our attention from "involuntarily sinking into" its target. Many critics, in many ways, have argued that the themes of consciousness and attention are a main concern in Nabokov's oeuvre, and the key role that is attributed to the phenomenon of attention here goes to prove that *Transparent Things* is one of the novels that can be used to justify this claim.[288] But despite clear resemblances between the statement of Nabokov's narrator and the fragments from Bergson and Berkeley that have been discussed earlier, there is also an important difference, or at least a significant addition to be discerned here. This addition is indicated by the imperative expressed through the use of the verb "must." The moral exhortation implied by the use of this verb becomes more explicit in the lines that follow:

> Man-made objects or natural ones, inert in themselves but much used by careless life (you are thinking, and quite rightly so, of a hillside stone over which a multitude of small animals have scurried in the course of incalculable seasons) are particularly difficult to keep in surface focus: novices fall through the surface, humming happily to themselves, and are soon reveling with childish abandon in the story of this stone, or that heath. I shall explain. A thin veneer of immediate reality is spread over natural and artificial matter, and whoever wishes to remain in the now, with the now, on the now, should please not break its tension film. Otherwise the inexperienced miracle-worker will find himself no longer walking on water but descending upright among staring fish.[289]

Again, we have here a vocabulary that is close to Bergson's in the way it uses metaphors of depth and surface to express the relation between matter and its representation. Again, there is the use of an imperative verb in the penultimate sentence ("should"). This time

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[287] *Transparent Things*, p. 489.
[288] A main concern for Bergson too. See, in this connection, one of his letters to William James, in: *Écrits et Paroles I, textes rassemblés par R. M. Mossé-Bastide*. Paris: PUF, 1957, p. 193: "Plus je réfléchis sur la question, plus je suis convaincu que la vie est, d'un bout à l'autre, un phénomène d'attention."
[289] *Transparent Things,* p. 489.

however, the consequences of failing to comply with the demands of efficient representation are explicitly specified in a cautionary metaphor: he who fails to stick to the "thin veneer of immediate reality […] spread over natural and artificial matter," he who breaks its "tension film" (recall Bergson's "mince pellicule"), "will find himself no longer walking on water but descending upright among staring fish." Thus, an ontological misinterpretation of the world that surrounds us is intimated to have moral consequences. These consequences, here still formulated in biblical terms of an imaginative nature, can ultimately grow to very concrete and disastrous proportions, as the conclusion of the unfortunate adventures of Hugh Person is about to show us.

4.4. Hugh's Tragedy: The Cataractal Mind

If we can do away with the events at the café scene in Witt as an anodyne instance of attention straying from the present, a meaningless lapse of consciousness, the same cannot be said for the two tragic deaths mentioned earlier. Let us treat them chronologically, and start with Armande's. As said, Hugh "accidentally" kills her in a particularly vivid dream, and a quick and simple explanation of her death would consist in a purely psychosomatic analysis of Hugh's aberrational behavior. The reader is seduced to be satisfied with an explanation of this kind, but if we were to fall for it, we would be much like the Freudian "thanatologist" of the story who tries to unearth the parodiable subconscious motifs Hugh may have had for murdering his wife. Of course, (as most of the time with Nabokov's novels) we'd do better to avoid interpretations of a psychoanalytic nature here, and simply stick with the narrator's evaluation of Hugh's fatal dream-murder who, after Hugh has given his description of what happened, remarks that "this is a bravura piece and not a patient's dream, Person."[290] This, then, is Hugh's bravura piece:

> Flames spurted all around and whatever one saw came through scarlet strips of vitreous plastic. His chance bedmate had flung the window wide open. Oh, who was she? She came from the past – a streetwalker he had picked up on his first trip abroad, some twenty years ago, a poor girl of mixed parentage, though actually American and very sweet, called Giulia Romeo, the surname means

[290] *Transparent Things*, p. 545.

> "pilgrim" in archaic Italian, but then we are all pilgrims, and all dreams are anagrams of diurnal reality. He dashed after her to stop her from jumping out. The window was large and low; it had a broad sill padded and sheeted, as was customary in that country of ice and fire. Such glaciers, such dawns! Giulia, or Julie, wore a Doppler shift over her luminous body and prostrated herself on the sill, with outspread arms still touching the wings of the window. He glanced down across her, and there, far below, like those tongues of red paper which a concealed ventilator causes to flicker around imitation Yule logs in the festive shop-windows of snowbound childhoods. To leap, or try to lower oneself on knotted ledgelinen (the knotting was being demonstrated by a medievalish, sort of Flemish, long-necked shopgirl in a speculum at the back of his dream), seemed to him madness, and poor Hugh did all he could to restrain Juliet. Trying for the best hold, he had clutched her around the neck from behind, his square-nailed thumbs digging into her violet-lit nape, his eight fingers compressing her throat.[291]

Notwithstanding, she jumps:

> What a fall! What a silly Julia! What luck that Mr. Romeo still gripped and twisted and cracked that crooked cricoid as X-rayed by the firemen and mountain guides in the street. How they flew! Superman carrying a young soul in his embrace![292]

The bravura of this dream-description is to be found in the way it manages to convey the instability of objects, the volatility of events and the extreme fragility of persons in our dream worlds. The "poor girl" in this dream is at least four persons at the same time: she is the Italian prostitute Hugh spent the night with on the day of his father's death, she is Julia, R.'s daughter whom we have met in the café scene and with whom Hugh has also spent a night in New York, and then, less explicitly, she is a blend of Armande and a Swiss sales girl (the image of the "Flemish long-necked shop girl in a speculum at the back of his dream" points to both the shop assistant from the store where his father died, and to the real (Flemish) Armande's struggles and protests while she is being killed). Then there is the image of the flames, which flickers from real fire to childhood memories of red-papered imitation fire in store-windows decorated for the holiday season. Finally, there is the main

[291] *Transparent Things*, p. 545.
[292] *Ibid.*

event itself, where Hugh both saves a person not very significant to him from near death, and accidentally murders a person whom he loves very dearly.

As already indicated, this dream can be suitably interpreted against the light of what has been said about transparency. The most adequate explanation of Hugh's murder, then, would not be psychological inadvertency, but onto-epistemological miscalculation. We may recall briefly here Rorty's and Boyd's ethical vocabulary which focused on "paying attention to others" and Nabokov's purported desire to make us aware of our failure to do so. Rorty's interpretation of this fragment, I would assume, would incorporate it in this line of argument: for are we not confronted here with a mind that is so *inattentive* to the world around it, that it is led to the ultimate moral crime of committing a murder? But would that provide us with an explanation? We could of course add to Rorty's claim some form of psychoanalytic analysis, and thus make sense of the murder through a combination of pragmatist and psychoanalytic vocabulary. But it seems that the special context and vocabulary of *Transparent Things* hints at the possibility of a more fruitful and more case-specific explanation.

The mind that commits this murder, we could argue, is not essentially inattentive but rather cataractal. The cataractal mind is characterized by a tendency to be inundated by the potential richness of reality. Reality literally falls upon this mind with the force of a cataract; and just like the clear and transparent blue of a lake that has to cope with the weight of a waterfall pounding down on it will turn white once the pressure becomes unbearable, the surface of the cataractal mind straining under the impossibility to adequately process reality will eventually start to froth.[293] The mind, at these moments, will be obfuscated in a way not unlike the eye is said to be when the lens is cataractally impaired. The violent clatter of the cascade of image-matter creates a surplus that the mind cannot cope with: there is too much image-matter, and not enough time or force to

[293] These connotations of the word "cataract" are retained in our use of it to describe an ophthalmologic condition of an eye that suffers from opaque spots on the lens. I suspect Nabokov himself obliquely plays on the slippery sense of the word when he chooses to decorate the wall of a vestibule with an enlarged photograph of the "Tara Cataract" (p. 495). Needless to say, no such waterfall exists in our world (a Baatara waterfall gorge exists in Lebanon though). Let us remark here too, just as an aside, that the deconstructionist critic could take the interpretation to the next level by pointing to the combination of words Hugh uses right before tragedy reaches its zenith. "What a fall," Hugh exclaims. Read with Nabokov's British accent in mind, "What a fall" is perfectly phonetically equivalent to, indeed – "waterfall." Right when Hugh's mind is at its cloudiest, a homophone of the word "waterfall," a synonym of the word "cataract," pops up. Coincidence?

adequately convert it into representations. The mind grows heavier and heavier until at some point it inundates, until at some point the mirror loses its shine, until ripples begin to form on the smooth surface of the lake, until, finally, the clear water in the basin turns to opaque froth.

Let us reflect for another moment on what actually happens over the course of this dream in terms of Hugh's attention, and ask ourselves a Bergsonian question about it: is Hugh paying *less* attention to his surroundings, or is he, in fact *adding something more* to them? Rereading the description we'd have to conclude that, indeed, he is *adding more* to it. To follow here the suggestion of common sense and say that Hugh "does not pay enough attention" seems a wrong evaluation; instead, looking at the facts of experience, we cannot but conclude that Hugh is in fact paying *too much* attention. To put things in the vocabulary of transparency: Hugh's representation of what is going on is too rich, adds too much depth, strays too far from the tension film of the surface, is not the light-weight envelope it is supposed to be, in short: is not transparent enough. And here, the moral importance of the obligation to render reality as transparent in our representation starts to become clear: failure to do so may have disastrous consequences for our ability to adequately live our lives amongst things and humans in society.

It might be opposed at this point that I am not taking seriously enough into account that this *is* a dream we are discussing, and that I am passing by the fact that, for all we know, dream-consciousness does not operate in the same way as day-time consciousness. Perhaps. The question whether the difference between dream consciousness and diurnal consciousness is more than a gradual one, is a scientific question, and one which falls outside of the scope of the present analysis. But I do not think psycho-scientific quarrels have a real role to play here. We'd be better off sticking to the very particular scientific laws governing the universe of *Transparent Things*: a universe where, according to a remark made by Hugh, all dreams are "anagrams of diurnal reality." The ending of the novel will tragically corroborate this hypothesis. Let us see how.

Imbibed with the urge to recover something of Armande and propelled by his enduring love for her, Hugh decides to make one last trip to Switzerland in order to visit the places they have been to together. During a hiking trip in the mountains, Hugh seeks out Armande's old familial residence, Villa Nastia: "He now had to find Villa Nastia, which

still retained a dead old woman's absurd Russian diminutive. She had sold it just before her last illness to a childless English couple. He would glance at the porch, as one uses a glazed envelope to slip in an image of the past."[294] I have already stressed the similarity of Bergson's metaphors to the ones employed by Nabokov's narrator, so I will not elaborate too much upon the trope of the "envelope" here, and mention just in passing again the remarkable equivalence of terms. Let it suffice to say that the "image of the past" Hugh attempts to slip into a "glazed envelope" greatly resembles the conversion from image-matter to representation as metaphorically described by Bergson in terms of "isoler l'enveloppe."[295]

After finishing his hike, Hugh manages, by unexpected chance, to obtain the room where he and Armande spent their first night together. Having put on his best clothes, all ready to receive Armande (or arguably, something like Armande's ghost) he starts to mentally summon her. Unfortunately for Hugh, just when he is "on the imagined brink of imagined bliss" and hears her footsteps approaching, the hotel is set on fire by a vindictive employee. Hugh's mind, in a trance-like state and completely preoccupied with the image of Armande, mistakenly assimilates all initial signs of the raging fire to images of a flight with Armande to New York. As the situation gets more critical, the imagined airplane explodes, and Hugh finally becomes aware of the fire. His mind, not having adapted to the fact that this present hotel room is dissimilar to the one where he slept the night before, sends Hugh in the wrong direction and instead of opening the window – which would have allowed him to escape from the fire – he opens a door to the hallway, permitting the fire to enter his room: "Now flames were mounting the stairs, in pairs, in trios, in redskin file, hand in hand, tongue after tongue, conversing and humming happily."[296]

Have we not read the last two words of this phrase, "humming happily," before? We have indeed; we have read them in connection to the cautionary words of the narrator at the end of the first chapter ("[…] novices fall through the surface, humming happily to themselves […]").[297] The repetition of words reminds us that we have now arrived at the moment where Hugh *is "*falling through the surface" of the present, his mind hopelessly

[294] *Transparent Things*, p. 549.
[295] Cf. Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*, p. 23, and the analysis of the passage from that page, above.
[296] *Transparent Things*, p. 561.
[297] For full quotation, see above.

grappling with "the transparent soap of evasive matter" (to use another expression from an earlier chapter). Thus, Hugh will prove unable to attune adequately to his present surroundings and the imminent threat that is before him.

> Crumbling partitions of plaster and wood allowed human cries to reach him, and one of his last wrong ideas was that those were the shouts of people anxious to help him, and not the howls of fellow men. Rings of blurred colors circled around him, reminding him briefly of a childhood picture in a frightening book about triumphant vegetables whirling faster and faster around a nightshirted boy trying desperately to awake from the iridescent dizziness of dream life. Its ultimate vision was the incandescence of a book or a box grown completely transparent and hollow.[298]

Emmanuel Levinas once claimed that when it comes to our confrontation with death, our gaze is uniquely directed to the future.[299] The description of Hugh's death shows that there are exceptions. Hugh's mind, which can again be described as cataractal here, keeps "falling through" the transparency of the present by relapsing and sinking into the past. Even as Hugh is dying, the "rings of blurred colors" (which seem closely related to the "transparent ring of banded colors around a dead person or planet" the narrator has referred to earlier[300]), are represented as something beyond what they are: a picture from a childhood book. Just like in the dream in which he kills Armande, Hugh's representations are over-flowing with image-matter. In more modern terms: his mind is filled with data that is of no pertinent use to him; worse, the impertinence of this data causes an overflow of the system that impedes on its practical capacity to successfully process the present. Reality hurtles in, and as matter-images are not adequately sampled, the load becomes too heavy to bear – representations can no longer be made into the light-weight envelopes they are supposed to be, and instead start to form bulky packages that are visibly too heavy for the shoulders of the mind to bear.

Hugh's last vision before he dies is of himself as "a nightshirted boy trying desperately to awake from the iridescent dizziness of dream life." The awakening seems to take place, in a flash, when a vision of "the incandescence of a book or a box grown

[298] *Transparent Things*, p. 562.
[299] Levinas, Emmanuel. *Le temps et l'autre*. Paris: PUF, 1983, pp. 59-61.
[300] *Transparent Things*, p. 553.

completely transparent and hollow" presents itself to his mind. A topsy-turvy awakening, for it is not from sleep to conscious life that Hugh awakes, but, as it were, from waking life to death. Death then, ultimately offers liberation from the thrall of the cataractal mind. The hurtling on of the sequence of images is brought to a halt, the wild flow of reality is frozen, so that the mind may find peace and put itself to rest at last – but in Hugh's case, *this* rest of the mind is of course no ordinary nap, and the highest possible price has been paid for it.

Chapter 5: Morals of *Ada*: Transgressing Laws, Transcending Time

5.1. Kant's Moral Problematic

The history of moral philosophy after Immanuel Kant has proven that as a philosopher, one can admire him or despise him, that one can agree with him or disagree with him, honor him with rational reverence or scoff at him in dismayed disdain, take his theses to be the crown jewels of reason, or do away with them as the ormolu trinkets of a senescent logic.[301] One question however, that almost no philosopher – even those who ultimately agree with the central tenets of Kant's moral philosophy – can avoid asking, is what it is that makes Kant's ethics seem so very demanding to us, the human beings who are to deal with its practical consequences?

What is it that makes Kant's ethics so hard to accept? Is it what Friedrich Nietzsche called the "ascetic cruelty" (*asketische Grausamkeit*)[302] of Kant's concept of duty, or what William Desmond, in the same line of argument but perhaps more cautiously, describes as the "ascetical comportment" present in Kant's ethical system?[303] Or is the problem, as Charles Taylor has argued, related to the relentless formality of part of Kant's system of morality itself, and the fact that in the end, philosophers who have continued Kant's line of thought have mostly ended up with solely a prescriptive "ought" and nothing much beyond that?[304] To answer these questions, and to unearth the problems they seek to address, a closer look at Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* imposes itself.

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[301] Kant's predilection for shiny metaphors, from the "jewel" of the good will "shining by itself" at the beginning of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, to the "starry heavens" illuminating the conclusion of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, is striking, especially for a philosopher who, more than any other philosopher in the history of philosophy, has built up a reputation for his lack of luster and his specious frugality.

[302] Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality* (transl. R.J. Hollingdale). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982, p. 163, paragraph 339.

[303] Desmond, William. *Ethics and the Between*. New York: SUNY Press, 2001, p. 100. Politeness aside, Desmond does find himself approaching Nietzsche's formulation on the next page, where he claims that the concept of transcendental reason in Kant's moral philosophy " […] can be, in fact, a kind of *violence* towards humanity […]." (*Ethics and The Between*, p. 101).

[304] See: Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992 (1989) pp. 79-88, particularly pp. 83-84. Taylor writes: "The mixture of Kantian and naturalist conceptions has yielded the picture of the human agent so familiar in much contemporary philosophy. […] The focus is on the principles, or injunctions, or standards which guide *action,* while visions

Kant's aim in the *Groundwork,* in his own terms, is "to work out once and for all a pure moral philosophy, completely cleansed of everything that may be only empirical and that belongs to anthropology."[305] This purification of the realm of morality, as one might call it, is inspired not just by Kant's predilection for philosophical neatness, but also, and more stringently, by the inherent demands of morality itself. Morality, as Kant sees it, is not about furnishing a set of "practical rules" for social conduct: it is about providing humanity with something far more serious than practical rules, namely what he calls "moral laws."

Now a moral law differs essentially from a simple practical rule in that the former must have "absolute necessity." And if moral laws are to have absolute necessity, that is to say, if they are to be universally valid and rigorously binding for all rational beings, then these moral laws will have to be grounded in something more fundamental than the vagaries of the empirical world, that is, they will have to be grounded metaphysically, "in concepts of pure reason."[306] If the aim of ethics is to come up with moral laws instead of a set of practical rules, the desideratum of the moral law now dictates that it be grounded in something beyond the realm of the physical world. According to Kant, we are, in a way, already familiar with the demands of this moral law, but because this familiarity is fragile and may not always suffice to keep us on the right track, it is the task of philosophy to give "durability to its precepts."[307] This task cannot be realized through any anthropological analysis of morality, but only by a "metaphysics of morals," and it is with the establishment of such a metaphysics of morals that Kant is concerned in the *Groundwork*. It is only through a metaphysical inquiry that the pure criteria of practical reason Kant is after may be found, and as such the *Groundwork* is also an attempt to clear the grounds for the *Critique of Practical Reason*, where these pure criteria of morality will be analyzed in a more intricate manner.

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of the good are altogether neglected. Morality is narrowly concerned with what we ought to *do*, and not also with what is valuable in itself, or what we should admire or love" (p. 84).

[305] Kant, Immanuel. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. In: *Practical Philosophy* (transl. Mary J. Gregor). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 44.

[306] Cf. Kant, *Groundwork*, pp. 44-45: "[…] the ground of obligation here must not be sought in the nature of the human being or in the circumstances of the world in which he is placed, but a priori simply in concepts of pure reason […]." The criterium is repeated multiple times, in various forms, and used to serve a number of purposes in Kant's argumentation. Cf. for example, the pages cited above: Kant, *Groundwork,* p. 90ff. (where Kant specifies that: "*Empirical principles* are not at all fit to be the ground of moral laws.")

[307] Kant, *Groundwork*, p. 59.

But before this pure realm of morality can be reached, we have to make our way through a philosophical purgatory. The *Groundwork*, looked at from the outside, looks like a series of transitions, isohyptically superimposed upon one another, the first transition taking us from "the common rational to philosophic moral cognition," the second from "popular moral philosophy to metaphysics of morals," the third from "metaphysics of morals to the critique of pure practical reason."

Although Kant himself in some way always already seems to hover in the last, top sphere of purity, he is never unwilling to reach out a helping hand to those who haven't arrived there yet, and thus the opening section of the *Groundwork* deals with the first practical and concrete question a person might have with regard to the moral law, namely: how do I have to act, in order for my actions to comply with the demands of this moral law? In other words: what defines a morally good action? Kant's answer, in short, is: your willing it to be in accordance with the moral law. That is to say, the "morally good" action is not just one that is acted out in conformity or accordance with the law, "it must also be done for the sake of the law." I have to act, not just in accordance with duty, but more importantly, *from* duty, and *out of respect for* the moral law. The moral worth of an action is decided, furthermore, not by the purpose to be attained by an act, but by "the maxim in accordance with which it is decided upon"; not by taking into account "the will in relation to the hoped for effect of the action," but by focusing on the "principle of the will without regard for the ends that can be brought about by such an action."[308]

Kant gives us many examples and reasons to show why natural inclinations can never suffice to *morally* justify an act, and why an act has to be performed out of a pure sense of duty to qualify as moral,[309] but structurally, the most important reason is related to his indelible belief in the autonomy of the will. Happiness, the satisfaction of my desires, inclinations to be healthy, successful, or rich – all are unsuitable for determining the moral worth of my actions, not because they are necessarily wrong or bad incentives as such, but because they are never completely situated within the autonomic bounds of my will. Kant pictures the will as "at a crossroads" between a-priori principles (which are formal), and a-

[308] Kant, *Groundwork*, p. 54.
[309] See Kant, *Groundwork*, pp. 52-54.

posteriori incentives (which are material).[310] Since a-posteriori incentives can never fully justify the demands of the moral law, this leaves the a-priori principles as the only candidate left for our criterion of moral worth.[311]

The reason I'm paying so much attention to the particulars of the first section of the *Groundwork* here, instead of getting directly to the point where the categorical imperative and its precepts are discussed, is that I want to put particular stress on the fact that it is particularly in this first section that the rest of the course of the *Groundwork* is set (and in fact, the course of almost everything Kant has to say about moral philosophy in general). It is no coincidence either that those philosophers who reproach Kant that the demands of his moral system are too ascetic, are usually directing their criticism towards just these foundational elements of his ethics. For indeed, with the nature of human beings in mind – human beings, with all their needs and desires – that which Kant lays down in the first section of the *Groundwork* may sound rather harsh and rigid.

However, Kant is not completely blind to the rigidity of the demands of the moral law. He at least shows some awareness of the harshness implied by excluding from the scope of morality everything that is connected to doctrines of happiness and all empirical incentives that are connected to the natural world of the senses. Such awareness surfaces most explicitly at the end of the first section of the *Groundwork*, where he discusses the "natural dialectic" at times arising from the conflict between the "strict laws of duty" on the one hand, and our "wishes and inclinations" on the other.[312] Yet, unfortunately for those who were hoping for some leniency after all the rigor, Kant interprets this natural dialectic only as another reminder of the need for practical philosophy to be as "pure" as possible. For only by means of the arguments of a pure practical philosophy would one be able to apodictically ground the concept of duty so as to guard it from any heteronomical influences from the world of the senses and our hopes and desires related to this world.

One cannot help but feel that this instance, at the end of the first section, where Kant introduces the problem of the "natural dialectic" (i.e., the confrontational tension between the moral law and our wishes, desires, and inclinations), constitutes a pivotal moment in

[310] Kant, *Groundwork*, p. 55.
[311] Cf. Kant, *Groundwork*, p. 56: "Only the representation of the law in itself […] insofar as it and not the hoped-for effect is the determining ground of the will, can constitute the preeminent good we call moral."
[312] Kant, *Groundwork*, pp. 59-60.

Kant's ethical philosophy. If we are to question Kant, this is the moment where the question must be formulated – for once the transition is made from common rational cognition to philosophic moral cognition, as Kant is about to do any moment now, there seems to be no argumentative way back. The ascending stages of *The Groundwork* are unidirectional: accept the premises and there is no escaping the conclusions. Thus, it is here that we should ask, with the criticism by Nietzsche, Taylor, and Desmond referred to above still strongly in mind: did not the fact that Kant already knew beforehand what he wanted his practical philosophy to prove from the beginning, the fact that he already knew the side he was going to choose in the dialectic between the dictates of duty and the demands of desire, make him blind to the protests that he must have known were going to arise from the side of the human being as a being of desire?

The *Groundwork* aims to clear the grounds for practical philosophy, to serve as an opening into the pure realm of duty, where of course ultimate autonomy and freedom is promised, but we may (and many do) wonder if this clearance and this opening do not at the same time imply a forfeiture and a closure for any real discussion of the "natural dialectic," that is to say, a discussion of this natural dialectic not from the perspective of the rigid practical philosopher, but from that of its central object: the impractical human being in all her or his dialectical frailty. Although the ascent from the simple plains of common human life to the starry realm of the critique of pure practical reason is as dazzling and elegant as one might expect from someone like Kant, one just keeps wondering if there is not something essential, something vital, that is somehow adumbrated or left behind.[313] This "something," I would argue, is exactly the richness of the "natural dialectic," or, to be more precise, the frailty that issues forth from this natural dialectic.

But to reproach Kant that his demands are cruel, or ascetic, or both, or stating that the formality of his system is out of tune with the concreteness of human life, can only take

[313] As mentioned, there are three layers to the purgatory of the *Groundwork*. This means that the dialectical frailty I'm referring to, although left behind most glaringly and most fundamentally in the first section, is in a way abandoned again in the other two "transitions" of the *Groundwork*. To discuss these other two "abandonments" in the same detailed fashion as the first would lead us too far astray from our concerns here. It may be added however, for the sake of completion, that in the second transition, from "popular moral philosophy to the metaphysics of morals," this dialectical frailty is left behind in the form of "the heteronomy of the will." (See Kant, *Groundwork*, pp. 89-91.) Thirdly, and lastly, it is left behind as "subjective necessity" connected to "the world of sense" in the final "transition from metaphysics of morals to the critique of pure reason." (See, especially, Kant, *Groundwork*, pp. 98-100).

us so far.[314] Two other, deeper questions, I think, are possible: one that is deconstructive, and one that is constructive. The first concerns Kant's ulterior motives: what propelled Kant to search for something like a moral law with absolute validity in the first place? A very tempting answer to this question, I think, has already been brought up, coming from one of his most memorable critics, Friedrich Nietzsche. It can be summarized in the neat formula Nietzsche uses for it: "the seduction of morality." Nietzsche specifies: "[Kant] believed in morality, not because it is demonstrated in nature and history, but in spite of the fact that nature and history continually contradict it."[315]

But instead of the latter question, we may also choose to ask a question from a more constructive perspective. Such as: is there some way in which Kant's system could be defended against what can be called (somewhat reductively) the dialectical-frailty-criticism put forward here? Is there some decision that Kant could have taken, somewhere along the road, maybe even *before* he started upon his ethical system, which would have allowed him to really engage with this criticism (instead of just discarding it as an anthropological critique that has no validity in the pure realm of ethics)?

One of Nietzsche's many eloquent condemnations of Kant states that:

> Kant appears honest and honorable in the best sense, but insignificant: he lacks breadth and power; he has not experienced very much, and his manner of working deprives him of the time in which to experience things – I am thinking, of course, not of crude "events" impinging from without, but of the vicissitudes and convulsions which befall the most solitary and quietest life which possesses leisure and burns with the passion of thinking.[316]

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[314] Not to mention that this sort of criticism, although it is one the most fundamental criticisms of his ethical system, is also the easiest to evade. "Most fundamental," because it touches at the sorest nerve of Kant's ethical system. "Easiest to evade," because convinced Kantians will just point to the fact that arguments concerning frailty, cruelty, asceticism, are all simple anthropological arguments – and these, of course, have no value in a discussion about ethics from their (Kantian) point of view. The critic may oppose in his or her turn that in their eyes, the frailty is metaphysical and cannot be avoided. But at that point the discussion is bound to hamper – the Kantian will persist in *his* belief that the criticism is anthropological and has no argumentative force in the pure realm of ethics, the critic in *her* belief that it is metaphysical, and should be taken into consideration.

[315] Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, *op.* cit., p. 3 (Vorrede/Introduction, par. 3): "[...] er [Kant] glaubte an die Moral, nicht weil sie durch Natur und Geschichte bewiesen wird, sondern trotzdem dass ihr durch Natur und Geschichte beständig widersprochen wird."

[316] Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, p. 198 (par. 481). In the original: "Kant erscheint, wenn er durch seine Gedanken hindurchschimmert, als wacker und ehrenwerth im besten Sinne, aber als unbedeutend: es fehlt ihm an Breite und Macht; er hat nicht zu viel erlebt, und seine Art, zu arbeiten, nimmt ihm die Zeit, Etwas zu erleben, — ich denke, wie billig, nicht an grobe „Ereignisse" von Aussen, sondern an die Schicksale und Zuckungen,

Beyond any discussion of the pertinence of this remark from a biographical perspective, it may be asked, in relation to this fragment, what Nietzsche exactly means by Kant's being deprived of "the *time* in which to experience things." How literal are we to take this reproach? Does Nietzsche imply that if Kant *had* adopted a manner of working allowing him the "*time* in which to experience things," he *would* have been able to come up with a convincing moral philosophy doing more justice to all those things in life that violently flare up at the touch of thought? Those are possible interpretations of Nietzsche's question. But what if we attempt to go beyond interpretation, and read a little more *into* this passage from Nietzsche, perhaps even slightly over-read it, in order to come to a formulation of *our* question to Kant? What if we asked: had Kant *made time for the concept of time* in his moral system, would this have resulted in it being better adapted to the rich violence and passion of life itself? Would he have been able, in that case, to address in his moral philosophy the heated matters on which thought is liable to burn its fragile fingers – the humbling passion of desire, the brute force of our inclinations, the seductive imagery of our hopes and wishes? It is through the mediatory potency of literature, through a reading of Nabokov's *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* that I will seek to address and answer these questions.

5.2. *Ada*'s Moral Problematic

Although Nabokov's longest, and arguably most complex novel, *Ada*'s "main" story line appears straightforward enough. *Ada* presents itself as "a family chronicle," a series of memories written down by its two protagonists: Van Veen and Ada Veen. The events, as presented, are said to have taken place on a fictional planet named "Antiterra" (or, alternatively, "Demonia"), which at times looks like a familiar copy of our own planet earth, but more often surprises by being slightly different from it. Van and Ada's main concern in writing down these memories is to give not just a description but also, one often feels, a justification of their love-affair, which is started in early childhood, and, although interrupted multiple times, endures until their death in very old age.

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denen das einsamste und stillste Leben verfällt, welches Musse hat und in der Leidenschaft des Denkens verbrennt." (*eKGWB,* cf. note 482.)

The description as I have just given of *Ada* does not seem to present anything of great interest to the moral philosopher. No obvious ethical problems stand out. And yet, *Ada* probably ranks a close second to *Lolita* when it comes to the amount of criticism that has been devoted to its moral dimension. Two explanations can be given for this.

First of all, the relationship between Ada and Van is no common relationship: the careful reader soon finds out that Van and Ada are siblings, and that their love affair is an incestuous one.[317] According to the official version of their family tree, Van and Ada are only first cousins. However, they soon discover (and so does the attentive reader) that as a consequence of a rather reckless amorous history on the part of their respective parents, they are actually – that is to say, biologically – brother and sister. Notwithstanding this discovery, they continue to be amorously involved.

The second moral quandary of the novel is posed by the presence of Ada's younger sister Lucette and her Ophelian suicide. Lucette, hopelessly and tragically in love with Van from an early age, suffers, not only from the fact that he, Van, is already in love with Ada, but also (and perhaps even more) from the rather questionable way Ada and Van treat her. Driven to despair by Van's disinterest, she eventually commits suicide. Contrary to their stance towards incest, both Van and Ada do seem to experience occasional moral qualms (be it later in life) with regard to Lucette, and Ada, at the end of the novel, is led to ruefully exclaim: "[…] we *teased* her to death!"

Although seemingly (from the perspective of the narrative) occupying a secondary role throughout most of the novel, Lucette has often been argued to stand at "*Ada's* moral center."[318] The argument, most famously made by Brian Boyd, in short, goes along the following lines: Van and Ada, in their passionate love for one another, blinded by hedonism and desire, dismiss every possible moral code and, in the process, cause many of the people surrounding them to suffer through their reckless behavior. The author himself however does *not* dismiss these moral codes in any way. On the contrary: to stress their ultimate validity, he has intricately woven into the texture of the novel the character of Lucette, who, by means of her kindness and helplessness, is there to remind us of the moral depravity of

[317] Moreover, although this is less likely to raise the eyebrows of contemporary readers, *Ada* does not shy away from vivid and explicit depictions of the more carnal and physical moments of Van and Ada's relationship.
[318] See: Boyd, *Nabokov's Ada, The Place of Consciousness*, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

Van and Ada's behavior, and the potential risks and dangers that attend it.[319] As in the case of *Pnin*, one might feel uneasy about some of the more moralistic tendencies underlying the ethical conclusions Boyd draws from his reading of *Ada* – but the fact remains that his description of Lucette as the "moral center" of the novel is very convincing.

But, one might ask here: what does all this have to do with Kant? Kant has nothing to say about incest, at least, not in any of his major works. So why is he relevant here? The question can be answered either directly, or a little less directly. A direct answer to the question has been provided by critic Dana Dragunoiu. Her moral evaluation is in many respects in line with Boyd's, as is her interpretation of Lucette's ethical role in the novel. Dragunoiu argues that Nabokov was not just a "rigid moralist,"[320] but, more specifically, a Kantian moralist.[321] Next to a number of historical and biographical clues,[322] she also offers

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[319] Cf. Boyd, *The American Years*, *op. cit.*, pp. 532-533. "Van and Ada may dismiss incest, but Nabokov does not […]. Nabokov chooses incest as a standard by which to assess all human responsibility. Van and Ada celebrate to the hilt the joys of their love. Behind them, Nabokov insists that the price of all the pleasure we can have through our intimate interconnections with others is our responsibility to others, a responsibility which increases the more closely our fates are linked with theirs." Boyd also shows, through a very elaborate and convincing pattern-linking argument, how Lucette (or her ghost) may have inspired Van and Ada to write *Ada* in the first place. His moral conclusions concerning the novel are – at least in part – based upon it: "[…] if Lucette has inspired Van to write *Ada*, her inspiration shows not only that she forgives Van and Ada for their part in her downfall and not only that she is beyond jealousy and wishes her brother and sister as much happiness as possible in mortal life […] but also that, in accordance with her deep kindness, she wishes others to share in the happiness of Van and Ada and to be warned of the need for the consideration whose absence contributed to her own suicide. In sending Van and Ada back to an investigation of their past, she generously gives them and their readers a foretaste of the delights of a life beyond time, where consciousness can survey and arrange the past in an endless blend of discovery and creative wonder." Eric Naiman, in his *Nabokov, Perversely*, provides a solid critical analysis of the importance of this argument in Boyd's reading of *Ada*, and points out how it plays a pivotal role in Boyd's moral evaluation of the novel. According to Naiman, it allows Boyd to "value both the pleasures of the text and the text's ethical message, to provide a happy resolution to the aesthetic and moral dilemmas posed by the novel." See: Naiman, Eric. *Nabokov, Perversely*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010, p. 263. The most elaborate account can be found in Boyd's already mentioned *Nabokov's Ada, The Place of Consciousness.*

[320] Often cited expression in the context of this discussion, used by Nabokov to describe himself. See: *Strong Opinions*, p. 193, and the introduction above.

[321] On her view, Nabokov, in *Ada*, "[…] uses Kant's ethical vocabulary from the critique of practical reason as a means to condemn Van and Ada." Pitting their happiness against the guilt that keeps sticking to it (for their happiness is "unearned"), she seeks to show how "there is something like a Kantian law underlying the universe of *Ada* which is hinted at, yet constantly ignored or belittled by Van and Ada, but which the presence of Lucette and her tragic fate keeps recalling." Dragunoiu, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Poetics of Liberalism, op. cit.*, p. 158.

[322] See, Dragunoiu, *op. cit.*, pp. 147-148. Dragunoiu gives two convincing explanations for Nabokov's familiarity with Kant. Firstly, Nabokov might have familiarized himself with Kant's philosophy during the bibliographical research he did while writing his novel *The Gift*. Secondly, the likelihood of Nabokov having studied Kant, right before he started composing *Ada*, in connection with the publication of a series of letters written by his father V. D. Nabokov in a magazine called *Aerial Ways* in 1965. One of these letters contains a reference to a book entitled *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* by Kuno Fischer. Given Nabokov's interest for

several textual arguments to back up her statements. Central to her argument is the analysis of a scene (over the course of which Kant is explicitly mentioned by name) in *Ada* that has played an important role in many critics' moral commentary of the novel. The time is 1892. Van has been separated from Ada for almost four years. Lucette, whom he has not seen since 1888, has come to visit him at Kingston University, where Van has obtained a post as lecturer in philosophy. Lucette, during the conversation she has with Van, reminds him of the closet in which Van and Ada repeatedly ("at least ten times," according to Lucette) locked her up when the two of them needed to get rid of her to indulge in their sexual activities, and Van reacts: "*Nu uzh i desyat'* (exaggeration). Once – and *never* more. It had a keyless hole as big as Kant's eye. Kant was famous for his cucumicolor iris."[323]

Dragunoiu argues that "Van's reference to Kant's "cucumicolor iris" is a still point around which the novel's ethical preoccupations revolve […]" and her argumentation for this is convincing. Yet I am not completely sure if we are to infer from the central importance of Kant (or his prying eyes, as reincarnated in Lucette's eyes peeping through the closet's keyless keyhole) here, that it is imperative we start reading *Ada* as a moral warning or lesson, or that the novel intends to lead us to consider adopting a system of

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everything concerned with his father, she argues he must have consulted the book, and, knowing Nabokov, probably done more than simply leaf through it.

[323] *Ada*, p. 298. Another, less direct reference to Kant occurs in the same scene, in the lead-up to Van's exclamation cited here. It concerns the discussion concerning the position of a certain black divan that helps determine the position of the closet where Lucette had been locked up. The text reads: "Now mentioned for the first time [the divan] – though both had been tacitly using it as an orientator or as a right hand painted on a transparent signboard that a philosopher's orbitless eye, a peeled hard-boiled egg cruising free, but sensing which of its ends is proximal to an imaginary nose, sees hanging in infinite space; whereupon, with Germanic grace, the free eye sails around the glass sign and sees a left hand shining through – *that's* the solution!" (*Ada*, p. 297.) As Briand Boyd points out in a note to this page, Nabokov is toying here with a passage from paragraph 13 of Kant's *Prolegomena*. Cf. *Ada*, p. 801, and: Kant, Immanuel. *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 92-93 (4-286). Van's "*that's* the solution" must be a direct reply to a question Kant asks there: "There are no inner differences that any understanding could think; and yet the differences are inner as far as the senses tell us, for the left hand cannot be enclosed in the same boundaries as the right (they are not congruent) notwithstanding all their mutual equality and similarity; the glove of one hand cannot be used on the other. What is the solution?" (Kant, *Prolegemona*, p. 93 (4-286)). It is not certain if Nabokov's concern and familiarity with the problematic comes directly from a reading of Kant's *Prolegemona* however. He might have also gleaned it from a book by Martin Gardner entitled *The Ambidextrous Universe*. Nabokov explicitly refers to this work in *The Texture of Time* portion of *Ada*: " 'Space is a swarming in the eyes, and Time a singing in the ears,' says John Shade, a modern poet, as quoted by an invented philosopher ("Martin Gardiner") in *The Ambidextrous Universe*, page 165." If we take a look at this particular page in *The Ambidextrous Universe*, we find there not only Shade's quote, but also a direct quote from precisely paragraph 13 of Kant's *Prolegomena*. For Gardner's explicit discussion of the question that Kant poses (and the solution he offers) in paragraph 13 of the *Prolegomena*, see: Gardner, Martin. *The Ambidextrous Universe*. London: Allen Lane, 1967 (1964), pp. 159-168.

Kantian values in our personal lives. On the contrary – and this is the less direct answer to the question concerning Kant's "involvement" in *Ada* – instead of providing us with an argument in favor of Kantian morality, I think it could also be argued that a reading of *Ada* allows us to deepen our sense of one of the fundamental complexities of Kant's moral system. To explain more exactly what is meant by this, we'll have to turn to a closer analysis of some of the more memorable passages from Nabokov's novel.

5.3. Laws and Transgressions (literary-critical exploration of the problematic)

Instead of asking in what ways Van and Ada transgress the kind of moral laws Kant establishes in his ethics, we may also ask, more fruitfully: *why* do they transgress them? And perhaps even: *how* could they have been prevented from transgressing them? To answer the first question by saying: "because they did not know and/or did not respect the moral law," and to reply to the second "by respecting the moral law," may adequately cater to the moralist whose aim it is to teach a lesson, but it cannot wholly satisfy an interest in the foundational and metaphysical aspects of a system of ethics.

One of the first things that will strike any reader of *Ada* is that its narrative is set not on earth, but on a sibling planet called Antiterra. Yet our earth is not completely absent from the novel's universe. A planet sharing its Latin name, Terra, is, by some people, expected or hoped to exist. Up to what extent this "Terra" equates with the planet earth inhabited by us, readers, is open to debate. One thing however, is fairly certain, and that is that on Antiterra, belief in its actual existence is linked to sickness and madness:

> Revelation can be more perilous than Revolution. Sick minds identified the notion of a Terra planet with that of another world and this "Other World" got confused not only with the "Next World" but with the Real World in us and beyond us.[324]

Van, driven both by his professional philosophical and psychological interests, and by the fact that the person who raised him and whom as a child he believed to be his mother,

[324] *Ada*, p. 21.

Aqua,[325] qualifies as one of these "sick minds," will spend much of his later academic life investigating the phenomenon of Terra. Although the event of Lucette's suicide can reasonably be placed at the moral center of *Ada*,[326] it is neither the only, nor the first suicide to take place in the novel. Aqua, having got so caught up in a form of "transcendental delirium"[327] related to her Terrarian beliefs, is led to commit suicide after having been transferred to a mental institution early in the novel. Her suicide note concludes:

> The hands of a clock, even when out of order, must know and let the dumbest little watch know where they stand, otherwise neither is a dial but only a white face with a trick mustache. Similarly, *chelovek* (human being) must know where he stands and let others know, otherwise he is not even a *klok* (piece) of a *chelovek*, neither a he, nor she, but a "tit of it" as poor Ruby, my little Van, used to say of her scanty right breast. I, poor *Princesse Lointaine, très loitaine* by now, do not know where I stand. Hence I must fall.[328]

What is interesting about this suicide note is that, for all its evident idiosyncracy, some of the terms Aqua finally uses to explain her suicide are not the dramatic personal terms one might expect in a suicide note, but rather, seem to be drawn from a general discourse on metaphysics ("human being must know…"). Moreover, the specific comparison with the hands of a clock seem to indicate that Aqua believes her suicide is ultimately incited by a failure to situate herself in time, and it is this early coupling of the concept of time and our moral decisions that should capture our attention here. For if this is only an early and arguably unreliable occasion of a moral decision being made to depend on a certain notion of temporality, the gesture will be repeated more explicitly and more forcefully at ulterior points in the novel.

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[325] One of the interesting problems the critic hits upon when she attempts to come up with "descriptions" of the characters in *Ada*, is that Nabokov has crafted the characters of the novel in a way that makes it inordinately hard to adequately categorize them. There are no "mothers," "fathers," "sisters," or "brothers" in *Ada* – as the narrative develops and keeps revealing new details about the family members, their "status" changes, too.
[326] Cf. note 316 above.
[327] *Ada*, p. 251.
[328] *Ada*, p. 29.

As mentioned, Aqua's early suicide forms a source of inspiration for Van's professional interest in the concept of Terra as a philosopher. At the same time, though, it is also connected to some of the moral considerations with regard to the incestuous relationship between Van and Ada:

> In this our dry report on Van Veen's early, too early love, for Ada Veen, there is neither reason, nor room for metaphysical digression. Yet, let it be observed […] that Van, who at the time had still not really tasted the Terror of Terra – vaguely attributing it, when analyzing his dear unforgettable Aqua's torments, to pernicious fads and popular fantasies – even then, at fourteen, recognized that the old myths, which willed into helpful being a whirl of worlds (no matter how silly and mystical), and situated within the gray matter of the star-suffused heavens, contained, perhaps, a glowworm of strange truth. His nights in the hammock […] were now haunted not so much by the agony of his desire for Ada, as by that meaningless space overhead, underhead, everywhere, the demon counterpart of divine time, tingling about him and through him, as it was to retingle – with a little more meaning fortunately – in the last nights of a life, which I do not regret, my love.[329]

This early metaphysical digression that disclaims to be one, offers a first glimpse of Van's feeling that an important insight might be gleaned from Aqua's suicide; that somehow, her belief in a sort of "Terra" could contain a "glowworm of strange truth"; this feeling, or as Van himself calls it, this "tingling," is juxtaposed to "the agony of his desire for Ada," and one might be tempted to use this passage as a springboard for an argumentation along the lines set out by Boyd and Dragunoiu. The tingling (that "was to retingle – with a little more meaning fortunately") can be read as a presentiment of a later insight to the extent that the "agony" of Van's "desire" for Ada may have blinded him to more important moral truths. But this would be to ignore the rather unexpected turn of the last phrase, where a chronological shift is followed by and paired with a moral shift: we move from 14- year old Van in his hammock to 90-year old Van in his bed, and from the intimation of an expression of moral awareness, to a confident denial of regret directly addressed to Ada. The unexpected turn taken by this passage thus deals out a sly stab at potential moralistic readings of *Ada.* Passages like these, where regrets are explicitly withdrawn exactly at the moment when one expected them to be offered, seem to hint at a deeper moral complexity.

[329] *Ada*, p. 61.

At times, Nabokov seems to willfully make the moral complexity of Van and Ada's relationship as dense as possible, and it is this kind of moral density that makes it so hard to arrive at a judgment as definitive as Dragunoiu's, who as we saw, argued that the presence of a "Kantian law" underlying *Ada*'s universe allows us to unequivocally condemn Van and Ada's reckless behavior. One of the things problematizing the situation is that, at least to Van, the relationship between Ada and Van is about more than just simple erotic satisfaction, and does actually involve love, as it is made clear through a visible play upon one of Kant's formulations of the concept of the categorical imperative: "Since Van loved Ada, that complicated release could not be an end in itself; or rather, it was only a dead end, because unshared."[330]

One of Kant's famous formulations of the categorical imperative in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* is precisely that "all rational beings stand under the *law* that each of them is to treat himself and all others never merely as means, but always *at the same time as ends in themselves.*"[331] Of course, one would be hard-pressed to convince someone that engaging in sexual intercourse with one's sister out of love for her is to treat her as an end in herself, and I don't want to argue that, *contra* Boyd or Dragunoiu, the right moral reaction to Van and Ada's incestuous affair would be to approve of it. My intention here is rather to encourage us to shift our ethical attention from the question of moral judgment to the issue of metaphysical explanation. Moral judgment often demands metaphysical patience, and Nabokov seems to be forcing upon us some form of such patience.

The way in which Van presents his love affair is often jubilant, and it is hard to sustain one's moral rigor while he shares his feelings with the reader. The following passage, for example, represents Van's mood the morning after first making love to Ada:

> […] the tiger of happiness fairly leaped into being. […] Tenderness rounds out true triumph, gentleness lubricates genuine liberation: emotions that are not diagnostic of glory or passion in dreams. One half of the fantastic joy Van was to taste from now on (forever, he hoped) owed its force

[330] *Ada*, p. 82.
[331] Kant, *Groundwork*, p. 83.

> to the certainty that he could lavish on Ada, openly and at leisure, all the puerile petting that social shame, male selfishness, and moral apprehension had prevented him from envisaging before.[332]

The events of this first night set off a long series of love-making, and the feelings of satisfaction and happiness Van draws from his relationship with Ada are persistent enough to make him forget about the demands of morality. There is an awareness of these demands, but never an acceptation, as shown also by a letter he writes (but does not send) to his father Demon:

> In 1884, during my first summer at Ardis, I seduced your daughter, who was then twelve. Our torrid affair lasted till my return to Riverlane; it was resumed last June, four years later. That happiness has been the greatest event in my life, and I have no regrets.[333]

Happiness can be as violent in the demands it imposes upon us as any moral law, and it is not until Van's father Demon finds out about their relationship and orders Van to put a halt to it, nine years after it has first started, that Van for the first time assentingly accepts to give up his relationship with Ada. It is during this period of separation that Ada's sister Lucette will make her final attempt at seducing Van. Van has boarded a transatlantic liner for New York, and, Lucette, having chased him aboard this boat, is described as "popping up as some transcendental (rather than transatlantic) stowaway."[334]

At first, things seem to go in the way of Lucette's desires. But when Van (his "lust sharpened by shame") finally seems on the point of giving in to Lucette's demands, the image of Ada (who, like her mother, has become an actress) unexpectedly presents itself on the screen of the boat's movie theater and leads him to suddenly withdraw himself to his cabin and leave Lucette and her unfulfilled cravings at the theater. When she calls upon him later that night, he lies to her on the phone that he "is not alone" in his cabin – Lucette, suspecting Van has betrayed her for another woman yet again, is now convinced that she will never succeed in winning over Van and, driven to despair, commits suicide by jumping overboard.

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[332] *Ada*, pp. 99-100.
[333] *Ada*, p. 284.
[334] *Ada*, p. 381.

If Lucette's suicide forms the main moral problem of the novel, this does not necessarily imply that Van can be held accountable for it. In fact, as so often in *Ada*, this suicide too is morally ambiguous; to arrive at a definitive moral judgment probably implies doing at least some violence to the complexity of the case. For when it comes to a moral judgment of Van, Nabokov makes most of the simple alternatives hard to accept. Should we say Van was cruel in denying Lucette's affection? This would entail forgetting that actually, for once, he was being reasonable: refusing to engage in sexual intercourse with a family member makes moral sense. But then: given what we know about his history with Ada and the way Lucette has been treated and sexually teased by them – could we not argue it was cruel of him, *after all that,* to disappoint Lucette on this occasion?

Van's own reaction is summarized in a letter he writes to Ada after Lucette's death:

> In other more deeply moral worlds than this pellet of muck, there might exist restraints, principles, transcendental consolations, and even a certain pride in making happy someone one does not really love; but on this planet Lucettes are doomed.[335]

Van somehow seems to settle for tragedy. There might be a "more deeply moral world," where morality is guided by restraints and principles, but that world is not this one: here, no such principles exist and "Lucettes are doomed."

Now, in what way, we might ask, can Lucette be seen as a character that reminds us of the fact that there is a Kantian moral law underlying the universe of Ada, as Dragunoiu would argue? To take Lucette's suicide as a reminder of such a moral law seems problematic, if only for the simple reason that Kant appears to morally condemn suicide under any condition because taking one's own life cannot be reconciled with the principles of the categorical imperative in the first place.[336] In a strict Kantian judgment of the situation, all three persons involved, Van, Ada, and Lucette would probably have to be condemned. But as I have said before, condemnations do not form the main concern here.

[335] *Ada*, p. 398.
[336] See: Kant, *Groundwork*, pp. 73-74 and p. 80.

Instead, let us retrace our steps, return to an earlier moment in the novel, and take a closer look at one of the specific ways Van and Ada might have "teased" their sister "to death":

> The three of them cuddled and cosseted so frequently and so thoroughly that at last one afternoon on the long suffering black divan he and Ada could no longer restrain their amorous excitement, and under the absurd pretext of a hide-and-seek game they locked up Lucette in a closet used for storing bound volumes of *The Kaluga Waters* and *The Lugano Sun*, and frantically made love, while the child knocked and called and kicked until the key fell out and the keyhole turned an angry green.[337]

It is Lucette's allusion to this scene that prompted Van's earlier cited reaction about the closet with regard to its keyhole and Kant's eye. And, as we have also seen, it is this mentioning of Kant that is central to Dragunoiu's argument about the Kantian morality underlying *Ada*'s universe. Given the course of events in *Ada* just described, and what we know of the relationship between Van and Ada, I would want to suggest that the affirmation needs to be nuanced. That is to say, instead of an *acceptance* of Kant's moral philosophy on Nabokov's part, I would argue it makes more sense to suppose an *awareness* of it. This awareness, though, never leads to an acceptance or a refutation of it, but only to a consideration of the same fundamental difficulty we have discussed towards the beginning of the present chapter – the tension in Kant's system between the doctrine of happiness and the doctrine of morals, between the ascetic demands of the moral law and the fragility of human desire, between what Nietzsche calls "the seduction of morality" and the often glaring absence of morality in the world we live in (often viewed, during our darker moments, as "the pellet of muck" from Van's letter).

Van's playful reference to the color of Kant's eyes, like his earlier play on the vocabulary concerning ends in themselves, suggests an awareness of Kant's thoughts on morality, but at the same time, his affirmations concerning the "pellet of muck" and his refusal to regret his incestuous relationship with Ada definitely questions the viability of its principles. It seems to be rather the tension of the "natural dialectic" between the rational

[337] *Ada*, p. 170.

law of morality and the irrational dictates of human happiness that is at stake most of the time in *Ada*. A later "closet passage" stresses this tension:

> We all know those old wardrobes in old hotels in the Old World subalpine zone. At first one opens them with the utmost care, very slowly, in the vain hope of hushing the excruciating creak, the growing groan that the door emits midway. Before long one discovers, however, that if it is opened or closed with celerity, in one resolute sweep, the hellish hinge is taken by surprise, and triumphant silence achieved. Van and Ada, for all the exquisite and powerful bliss that engulfed and repleted them (and we do not mean here the rose sore of Eros alone), knew that certain memories had to be left closed, lest they wrench every nerve of the soul with their monstrous moan. But if the operation is performed swiftly, if indelible evils are mentioned between two quick quips, there is a chance that the anesthetic of life itself may allay unforgettable agony in the process of swinging its door.[338]

The "monstrous moan" of the creaking wardrobes of memory are visibly (and audibly) connected to the closet where Lucette has been locked up, and the "memories" that "had to be left closed" are most likely connected to feelings of regret concerning Lucette. But as this passage points out so clearly, the present demands of happiness often lead us to blot out any moral reservations related to our pasts that might interfere with it. Happiness has no conscience, and, quite literally, no time for morality.

Van, throughout most of the novel, does not have time for it either, because he is just too busy being happy with Ada. At the beginning of the chapter I paid some attention to Aqua's suicide, and to Van's fascination with it. I pointed out how Aqua sought to explain the motives of her suicide in metaphysical terms, comparing her condition to the hands of a clock lost on their dial. I also pointed out that this was one the first occasions in the novel where moral decision-making is being related to the notion of temporality. The way Van and Ada try to exclude from the story of their love any memory that could potentially interfere with its success and the happiness depending upon it, underlines again the centrality of the notion of time. The force of our moral deliberations, the novel keeps hinting, seems to rely upon our position in time, on our being as temporal beings.

Aqua's suicide note does not only form the inspiration for Van's investigation of the notion of Terra, it also leads to his writing a treatise on the concept of time. This treatise,

[338] *Ada*, p. 345.

called "The Texture of Time," is presented to the reader as part four of *Ada*, and as such, might be implied to contain some important clues to its overall interpretation. Its verbal richness has triggered many critical discussions about it, but for my purposes here, I only want to single out the element in it that I think is important for the moral discussion that has been concerning us here.

What stands out in Van's theory of time is that, instead of the traditional three-dimensional idea of time, it presents a two-dimensional view. The only temporal reality, according to Van, is the reality of the "now." Next to this now, there is some room for the past, but "[…] the future is a fantasm belonging to another category of thought essentially different from that of the Past."[339] The future, according to Van, "is but a quack at the court of Chronos," and " 'To be' means to know one 'has been.' 'Not to be' implies the only 'new' kind of (sham) time: the future. I dismiss it. Life, love, libraries, have no future." Van stipulates:

> There are only two panels. The Past (ever-existing in my mind) and the Present (to which my mind gives duration and, therefore, reality). If we make a third compartment of fulfilled expectation, the foreseen, the foreordained, the faculty of prevision, perfect forecast, we are still applying our mind to the present.[340]

Van's overall intention[341] in *The Texture of Time*, as he specifies it himself, is "giving a new life to Time by cutting off Siamese Space and the false future."[342] The *Texture of Time* is set up as a metaphysical treatise, but that does not mean that acceptance of its main theses has no practical consequences.

At the beginning of this section I said that the main question I wanted to answer with regard to *Ada,* was not, if Van and Ada were to be morally condemned according to a Kantian morality (whether it be by Nabokov, his critics, or us), but to find out why and how

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[339] *Ada*, p. 434.
[340] *Ada*, p. 448.
[341] Nabokov studied the works of many contemporary philosophers and scientists while he worked on *The Texture of Time*. Interestingly enough, he seems to have played with the thought of the non-existence of the future long before he started upon these studies: a link that deserves further exploration seems to exist between Van's dismissal of futurity and a contention by another professor of philosophy in Nabokov's work, Adam Krug, who also argues that "the future does not exist." Cf. *Bend Sinister*, p. 204.
[342] *Ada*, p. 451.

they transgress the moral law. In what has preceded, some time has been spent focusing on how the violent demands of happiness and the moral fragility resulting from it could be made part of an account seeking to explain some of the "how" and some of the "why" of this transgression. But as mentioned earlier in regard to the "dialectical-frailty-criticism" of Kant's moral system, there are formal limits to the explanatory force of this answer. Taking into account Van's metaphysical ideas about time, and using them as an explanation for his moral shortcomings, though, may provide us with a more durable explanation, and one that also casts a light on some of the difficulties *underlying* any possible acceptation of Kant's moral law.

In order to do so, let us start by reconsidering Nabokov's triple use of the term "transcendental" in *Ada*.[343] In Kant's oeuvre, the word is set apart from its everyday use as "transcendent," and, used epistemologically, meant to indicate a concern with the conditions of possibility of knowledge.[344] Nabokov, on the other hand, I would argue, uses the term both in its traditional sense and in a Kantian sense. That is to say, in his use of the term "transcendental" in *Ada*, the components of "reaching beyond" and "constituting a condition of possibility" join. But contrary to Kant, Nabokov's concern in *Ada* is not with the conditions of possibility of knowledge, but with the conditions of possibility of morality.

I take Nabokov's, or to be more precise, Van's use of the word "transcendental" to refer both to the possibility of a beyond and to the conditions of possibility of a moral law. Aqua, suffering from her "transcendental delirium" and Lucette, "popping up as a transcendental stowaway," both function as what I would call, not reminders, but intimations of the moral law. Lucette's suicide, as we saw in Van's reaction to it, does not cause him to recognize the existence of a set of Kantian moral principles underlying or directing his universe, but instead, makes him despair about its possibility "on this pellet of

[343] *Ada*, p. 251, p. 381, p. 398; all cited above.

[344] See, especially Kant's note to the appendix of the *Prolegomena*, where he calls to order one of his reviewers who has called the system he presented in the *Critique of Pure Reason* a system of transcendent or higher idealism. Kant is unforgiving in his *réplique*: "Not on your life the *higher*. High towers, and metaphysically tall men like them, round both of which there is commonly a lot of wind, are not for me. My place is the fruitful *bathos* of experience, and the word transcendental, the meaning of which I have indicated so many times, though the reviewer has not grasped it once (so cursorily has he looked at everything) does not mean something that goes beyond all experience, but something which, though it precedes (a priori) all experience, is not destined for anything more than solely to make cognition of experience possible. If these concepts step beyond experience, their use is called transcendent, in distinction from their immanent use, i.e., use limited to experience." (Kant, *Prolegomena, op. cit.*, pp. 173-174).

muck." At the same time, he leaves room for the possibility that there might be a planet, unlike his own, where such a moral order does exist. A Kantian morality is intimated, but not presently given. At such moments of great tension, something in us speaks of moral laws and order, and yet, paradoxically, the event that gives rise to this voice is somehow silenced before it may speak its whole message.

Linking Van's letter concerning Lucette's suicide to Aqua's suicide note, we might see how Van's moral evaluation of Lucette's suicide is also connected to Aqua's "transcendental delirium" and the notion of Terra, as both a "Next" world and the "real world in and beyond us." Aqua's final downfall, she says herself, is related to her inability to determine where she stands – in her case, this inability is related to determine her position in both space and time, between the chaotic Antiterra of her actual existence, and Terra as the image of intimated harmony beyond Antiterra. Unable to decide which of the two universes to accept as the actual or real one, she is driven to despair and suicide. Van's reaction to Aqua's suicide note is rather stoic:

> "If we want life's sundial to show its hand," commented Van, developing the metaphor in the rose garden of Ardis Manor at the end of August, 1884, "we must always remember that the strength, the dignity, the delight of man is to spite and despise the shadows and stars that hide their secrets from us. Only the ridiculous power of pain made her surrender."[345]

But despite the stoic reaction, Aqua's concern with Terra does inspire Van's interest in it. The reflections on the "demon counterpart of divine time" cited earlier go to show this. The idea of a more deeply moral world, as it resurfaces after Lucette's suicide, I would argue, is connected to these early tingles and the particularities of Aqua's suicide as well. Aqua, before her death, has made a comparison between her lost position between worlds and the lost hands of a clock; Van opposes to this "life's sundial" and our desire to make it "show its hand." Like Aqua, he moves from this temporal image to a practical insight, albeit a more stoic one. What I draw from all this is that there is a deep connection between Van's interest in time and his interest in Terra; that there is a relationship between the tingle of "the demon counterpart of time" and the possibility of a world that is "more deeply moral"

[345] *Ada*, p. 29.

than the one where he lives, and that this possibility is related to our ability to determine our position in time.

What does this have to do with the question concerning the conditions of possibility of morality? Aqua and Lucette, linked in and through their "transcendentality," both figure as intimations of morality. Both also hint at a deep link between the importance of our position in time and moral tragedy. Van, as we have seen, denounces the future as "sham time," denies it any ontological status, and dismisses it completely as a form of time. But, if, as we have also seen, to determine our position in time is of essential relevance to our moral acts and evaluations, what then, does this imply for someone who fails to accept the reality of the future? Could it not be argued that making actual moral decisions implies taking some sort of stance toward the future; that decision-making implies, at the very least, a recognition of the endurance of my being in time, and a recognition of the fact that this endurance entails a form of responsibility? One gets the impression that it is precisely such a sense of responsibility that, in Van's case, is often blotted out by the demands of present happiness. This leads me to ask my last question of the chapter; a question that may be addressed both to Van and to Kant: could we think of time, more specifically future time, as one of the essential conditions of possibility for morality?

5.4. Time and Ethics (metaphysical exploration of the problematic)

Time, for Kant, is not a thing, nor some kind of quality attached to things as they are in the world as such.[346] In other words, time is not to be found in the world, but in us. It is not an empirical term to be distilled from experience, but an inner intuition which precedes and shapes all experience.[347] Yet time is not just an intuition, it is a "pure intuition a priori," or, put differently, a "mere form of our sensible intuitions."[348] These affirmations about time

[346] See: Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason* (transl. and ed. by Guyer and Wood). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 180: "Time is not something that would subsist for itself or attach to things as an objective determination […]." The German text reads: "Die Zeit ist nicht etwas, was für sichselbst bestünde, oder den Dinge als objektive Bestimmung anhinge [...]."(Kant, Immanuel. *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1998, p. 108 (A33/B49).
[347] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, *op. cit.*, pp. 178-179, and: Kant, *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*, *op. cit.*, p. 106, (A31, B46-47).
[348] Kant, *Prolegomena*, p. 90.

are summed up in Kant's concept of the "transcendental ideality of time"; "transcendental" referring to the fact that it serves as a condition of possibility, "ideality" pointing to the fact that it only has subjective reality, and no absolute reality (i.e., does not exist as a thing in itself).[349]

The vocabulary Kant uses to construct his notion of time may seem hermetic and needlessly erudite, but for all its abstractions, one would be hard-pressed to find another notion of time in the history of philosophy (except maybe Augustine's) that is so well attuned to our own concrete experience of time in daily life. Kant admits that what would be left of time after severing it from both all things in themselves in the world and abstracting (*abstrahieren*) from it every concrete sensible content may make time amount to "nothing whatsoever" (*gar nichts*). And yet this "nothing" determines practically everything. That is to say, it is what structures and shapes, what serves as the condition of possibility for everything in the world *as it appears to us*. And given that the world as it is in itself, taken apart from the way it appears to us, can never be *known* to us, the concept of time means indeed a lot to us. And it is this "nothing-whatsoever-meaning absolutely-everything" aspect of Kant's time that is so euphoniously in tune with our prosaic experience of time. For what is time to us indeed, but an infinitely light fixture upon which the whole solid mass of our perceptions rests? We may grow aware of the presence of such a fixture, and grow aware of the decisive role it plays, but the more we weigh it down with importance, the more it seems to lose weight and substance – until "everything" becomes "nothing whatsoever" again.

I'm not so much interested in the intricacies of Kant's theory of time as such, as in the implication of this theory of time for his ethical works. For some reason it seems as if, although Kant deliberately set up his three critiques as a unity, not many scholars have investigated specifically in the relation between what he had to say about time in his metaphysical philosophy on the one hand, and about ethics in his practical philosophy, on the other.

That Kant himself at least considered the question appears from a section called *Critical Elucidation of the Analytic of Pure Practical Reason,* which closes the first book of

[349] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, pp. 178-181, and: Kant, *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*, pp. 108- 111 (A33-36 / B49-53).

The Critique of Practical Reason. As we might expect from what we have read in the *Groundwork* and the *Critique of Pure Reason*, a philosopher like Kant will not be willing to grant much importance to something like temporality in the domain of ethics. For if the moral law is to retain its indelible force, we cannot ground it into anything empirical:

> […] that pure reason, without the admixture of any empirical determining ground, is practical of itself alone: this one had to be able to show from *the most common practical use of reason*, by confirming the supreme practical principle as one that every natural human reason cognizes – a law completely independent of any sensible data – as the supreme law of its will.[350]

Practical reason, if it is to have validity, has to be grounded in a-priori principles. Kant repeats in the *Critique of Practical Reason* his argument from the *Groundwork* and introduces the same distinction between the "doctrine of happiness" and the "doctrine of morals." Happiness, as put forward earlier, cannot be a principle or a condition of duty, because it too depends upon our existence in the empirical world.[351] As such, it is to be scrupulously excluded from the domain of pure practical reason, just like everything else possibly related to our will that is not the moral law itself:

> Now, because all determining grounds of the will except the one and only pure practical law of reason (the moral law) are without exception empirical and so, as such, belong to the principle of happiness, they must without exception be separated from the supreme moral principle and never be incorporated with it as a condition, since this would destroy all moral worth just as any empirical admixture to geometrical principles would destroy all mathematical evidence […].[352]

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[350] Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Practical Reason*. In: *Practical Philosophy* (transl. Mary J. Gregor). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 213. German original: "Aber daß reine Vernunft, ohne Beimischung irgend eines empirischen Bestimmungsgrundes, für sich allein auch praktisch sei: das mußte man aus dem *gemeinsten praktischen Vernunftgebrauche* dartun können, indem man den obersten praktischen Grundsatz als einen solchen, den jede natürliche Menschenvernunft als völlig a priori, von keinen sinnlichen Datis abhängend für das oberste Gesetz seines Willens erkennt, beglaubigte." (Kant, Immanuel. *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1963, p. 106).

[351] Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 214.

[352] Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 215. German original: "Da nun alle Bestimmungsgründe des Willens, außer dem einigen reinen praktischen Vernunftgesetze (dem moralischen), insgesamt empirisch sind, als solche also zum Glückseligkeitsprinzip gehören, so müssen sie insgesamt vom obersten sittlichen Grundsatz abgesondert und ihm nie als Bedingung einverleibt werden, weil dieses ebensosehr allen sittlichen Wert, als empirische Beimischung zu geometrischen Grundsätzen alle mathematische Evidenz, das Vortrefflichste, was (nach Platos Urteile) die Mathematik an sich hat, und das selbst allem Nutzen derselben vorgeht, aufheben würde" (*Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, pp. 108-109).

But if I cannot deduce the principle of duty from anything empirical, if happiness cannot serve as a condition when it comes to the validity of the moral law, then something else is to be brought forward as a condition. And this, for Kant, is freedom. The challenge now is that this freedom needs to be established from the point of view of the universality of the moral law, and not from the point of view of the empirical subject. For as an empirical subject, our existence is completely determined by the laws of nature. Our freedom, then, can only be ascribed to our being as separated from our being in the empirical world, that is to say, can only be ascribed to our existence as intelligible beings or, as Kant sometimes refers to it, as "the same being as a thing in itself."[353] This makes sense, because if we were to ascribe freedom to our actions as beings in the empirical world, we would inevitably hit upon an unsolvable contradiction. And this is where the concept of time starts to play an important role.

According to Kant, then, our being as empirical is both "determinable in time" and submitted to the natural law of causality. Now if I were to try and take the combination of these two insights into the realm of morality, the notion of freedom would directly evaporate, for I would then have to accept that every moral action is preceded by another action, and according to the law of causality, this previous action has to be put forward to explain it. This means that there would be something else, rather than my own autonomous will, that could be taken to morally determine my actions – and, how then, if they are not completely my actions, can I still be held accountable for them? I can't, because for that my absolute freedom in the realm of morality had to be assumed. Kant's solution for this "apparent contradiction between the mechanism of nature and freedom in one and the same action," is to say that:

> […] the natural necessity which cannot coexist with the freedom of the subject attaches merely to the determination of a thing which stands under the conditions of time, and so only to the determination of the acting subject as appearance, and that, accordingly, the determining grounds of every action of the subject so far lie in what belongs to past time and is *no longer within his control*.[354]

[353] Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 216.
[354] Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 218. German original: "daß die Naturnotwendigkeit, welche mit der Freiheit des Subjekts nicht zusammen bestehen kann, bloß den Bestimmungen desjenigen Dinges anhängt, das unter Zeitbedingungen steht, folglich nur denen des handelnden Subjekts als Erscheinung, daß also sofern

In order to save freedom, and thus the foundation of the moral law, Kant is forced to take the subject as regards his moral acts, decisions, and evaluations, out of the realm of time. Thus he is forced to have recurrence to his distinction between the world as *noumenal* and the world as *phenomenal*, and will have to reintroduce the same distinction at the heart of the subject itself:

> But the very same subject, being on the other side conscious of himself as a thing in itself, also views his existence *insofar as it does not stand under conditions of time* and himself as determinable only through laws that he gives himself by reason; and in this existence of his nothing is, for him, antecedent to the determination of his will, but every action – and in general every determination of his existence changing conformably with inner sense, even the whole sequence of his existence as a sensible being – is to be regarded in the consciousness of his intelligible existence as nothing but the consequence and never as the determining ground of his causality as a *noumenon*.[355]

Thus, the moral human being is safely placed inside the cocoon of the *noumenal*, and his acts, in so far as they are moral acts, sheltered from the determinable realm of time and space. Kant justifies this move by saying that:

> [...] reason, when it is a question of the law of our intelligible existence (the moral law), recognizes no distinction of time and asks only whether the event belongs to me as a deed and, if it does, then always connects the same feeling with it morally, whether it was done just now, or long ago.[356]

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die Bestimmungsgründe einer jeden Handlung desselben in demjenigen liegen, was zur vergangenen Zeit gehört und *nicht mehr in seiner Gewalt ist*" (Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, p. 113).

[355] Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 218. German original: "Aber ebendas selbe Subjekt, das sich anderseits auch seiner als Dinges an sich selbst bewußt ist, betrachtet auch sein Dasein, *sofern es nicht unter Zeitbedingungen steht*, sich selbst aber nur als bestimmbar durch Gesetze, die es sich durch Vernunft selbst gibt, und in diesem seinem Dasein ist ihm nichts vorhergehend vor seiner Willensbestimmung, sondern jede Handlung und überhaupt jede dem inneren Sinne gemäß wechselnde Bestimmung seines Daseins, selbst die ganze Reihenfolge seiner Existenz als Sinnenwesen, ist im Bewußtsein seiner intelligibelen Existenz nichts als Folge, niemals aber als Bestimmungsgrund seiner Kausalität als *Noumens*, anzusehen" (Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, pp. 113-114).

[356] *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 219. German original: "[...] weil die Vernunft, wenn es auf das Gesetz unserer intelligibelen Existenz (das moralische) ankommt, keinen Zeitunterscheid anerkennt und nur fragt, ob die Begebenheit mir als Tat angehöre, alsdann aber immer dieselbe Empfindung damit moralisch verknüpft, sie mag jetzt geschehen oder vorlängst geschehen sein" (Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, p. 115).

Kant's solution is elegant, but it may be wondered if it is not too radical. Kant's defense that, rationally, the road he is taking here is the only road we could possibly take if we want to retain the concept of freedom, *and* not part with everything that has been already proven in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, is convincing. But we might question the validity of this argument from our perspective as human beings: surely, Kant may affirm that moral law "recognizes no distinction of time," but what about the human beings who are to act upon it? Are not *their* actions, at least, guided by a sense of time, if not in the form of past regrets and present pleasures, then at least, from their nature *as actions*, by hopes and expectations with regard to the future? Does not the word "act" imply an intention, and does not an "intention" presuppose some sense or presentiment of the future state of affairs it might lead to?

Kant himself would probably object that such questions are hopelessly misdirected, that they are nothing but nostalgic attempts to clandestinely reintroduce anthropological considerations into the realm of morality – considerations of which it has already been proven that it was absolutely necessary that they be excluded. And yet one feels that if Kant has the right to maintain that the "unconditional necessity of the moral imperative" is to be comprehended "despite its *incomprehensibility*,"[357] his critics could be condoned for not being completely convinced.

Perhaps, after all that has preceded, the crucial question can be formulated thus: how can we reunite the insight that our concrete actions are always motivated by some sort of future Good, or by some sort of notion of the kind of person we want to be in the future (whether this person be the person we already are, or a different one, does not matter) *without* simply waving away Kant's arguments about the heteronomy of the will (or the doctrine of happiness, or subjective necessity, or our determinability in time) as not sufficing to morally justify these actions?

Here's a tentative answer in the form of another question: could not Kant have made his moral system, let us say, a little more attractive for human beings, by keeping time, or at least the future, within its bounds? Of course he wouldn't have been able to do this by recognizing time to be a determining ground for our actions from the viewpoint of morality

[357] Kant, *Groundwork*, p. 108.

– but, then: could he not have done it by attributing to the future the same sort of status he attributed to the concept of time in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and in the *Prolegomena*?

As it is, the only section in the *Critique of Practical Reason* dealing with ethics and temporality is a section where Kant is doing all he can find in his might in order to shut it out. As we have seen, this procedure stands to reason in Kant's case. Time is a form of intuition, and as such appertains to the realm of the senses, the empirical world and Nature as determined by the laws of science. The universe, from this perspective, is deterministic. From the perspective of the moral subject, though, the universe has to be undetermined. The moral subject must be a free subject. Everything, for Kant, hinges on freedom and autonomy. And he can't allow the concept of time into his moral system, for this would seemingly bring down the whole structure. But is he really forced to exclude it as rigorously as he does? Could he not have made an attempt to retain it as the sort of "nothing whatsoever" that he admitted determined so much in the realm of the senses? Could he not, in other words, have retained temporality in the realm of ethics as a *form of moral intuition*?

Kant's main problem with allowing temporality into the domain of pure practical reason seemed to be that it was liable to interfere with the notion of responsibility. Our being-determined-in-time cannot play a role in the realm of morality because that would deprive us of a part of our responsibility, and thus would make the foundation of our freedom wobbly, whereas we need this freedom to be pure and absolute to vouchsafe the universal validity of the moral law. As such, I think there is no way Kant could accept an awareness of past events or selves into the moral realm. He has to dismiss any claims as to the extent that these were to count for anything in the moral evaluations of our actions. It is just fundamentally impossible for Kant's moral system to take them into account.

But as regards the temporal category of the future, I think there might just be a little chink in the system through which it could be smuggled in. For here, we could exploit the complex duality of the future as both a potentiality and a nothing. The future pertains both to what might come, but also to that which may not come. My future, though I can never really call it "anything," neither exactly qualifies as "nothing." It is an almost-nothing, but as an almost-nothing means almost-everything to me as it forms the condition of possibility of most of my actions. I cannot will this to be not the case, because my actions only qualify as

my actions on the ground of the assumption that they are to promote the endurance of my being as a self.

Now when I say this futurity constitutes a form of moral intuition, I aim to attribute to it the same *formal status* as the notions of time and space in the world of appearances. At the same time, by bringing it into the realm of practical reason, I am disconnecting it from time as such, for if I didn't do this, it could not be brought into the realm of morality in the first place. If this sounds paradoxical, it is because the notion of the future can only be presented as a paradox; the paradoxity of the future being that while it is a category of time, it never takes place *in time*.

This is why it remains possible to think of the future (in its projected representation of an almost-nothing determining almost-everything for me), even in Kant's realm of pure practical reason, as a justification for our acts. It can just never be made to serve as *the whole* justification for our acts. For even though it can be said to determine almost everything, we can never lose awareness that it is in fact, as Kant said about time in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, "nothing whatsoever." It is this tension of the future as almost-nothing determining almost-everything that still needs to be resolved by an appeal to the moral law. But this moral law, although deciding almost everything on a moral level, once we have introduced the futurity as a form of moral intuition, can never be made to justify complete ignorance of *this* aspect of our being-in-time in the ratification of its judgment.

This, then, is the moral-metaphysical lesson I draw from my reading of *Ada* through Kant, and Kant through *Ada*: that the dialectical tension between the demands of happiness and the demands of the moral law can only be resolved if we are allowed to smuggle back into the pure realm of morality *something* pertaining to our empirical constitution. It is only then that we can assure that *some sort of link* with the immanence of our concrete existence is retained, and only thus that Kant's morality, after having soared up to the starry heaven, can be brought back down to earth. Because we cannot sensibly introduce anything of the realm of the senses into the domain of pure practical reason, the only viable alternative to establish this "link" is to have its place occupied by something which *comes forth* out of our existence in the realm of the senses, but never concretely *belongs* to it. This something we have identified as the future, or, more specifically, our sentiment that the futurity of our

being forms a condition of possibility for the moral decisions we make in regard to its endurance and its prolongation, its enduration, so to speak.

To accept such a notion of futurity into the realm of Kantian morality does not entail any enfeeblement of the force, validity, and applicability of the moral law. It just means that, instead of staking all of its practical force upon the rational analysis of the demands of the categorical imperative, we need to transpose our attention to finding viable ways to problematize and question the ever-renewed tension between the demands of the categorical imperative and the demands of all those things (hopes, desires, expectations) pertaining to our moral being-in-time as driven by a sense of futurity. There is no need to do away with the categorical imperative as such, nor a need to circumscribe its ethical reach – but we do need to keep questioning the consequences of its demands in the context of our concrete being-in-time (something that also goes, in fact especially goes, for those who feel its validity is important to us). Nabokov's *Ada*, I think, does just this. Without resolving its fundamental tension, the novel precisely shows *how much* of the tension depends upon our position as human beings in time. And it is by problematizing Kant, rather than following or opposing him, that Nabokov manages to present a fuller, richer picture of the essential human frailty issuing forth from this tension.

Chapter 6: *Lolita*'s Lover: Coming to Terms with Time

6.1. Lingering Remarks

At the end of the previous chapter concerning *Ada*, I have argued that any ethical discourse or vocabulary that seeks to speak about the moral value of our actions cannot sensibly do so without saying something about temporality as well. To separate time and morality by reducing the former to a purely physical or metaphysical concept or by claiming the realm of the latter must always remain independent from such phenomenal whims as relate to the contingencies of the clock will eventually lead to a suspension of the project of ethics itself. Why? Because it is only by taking into account the temporality of our acts that we can do justice to some of our deeper concerns with the demands of our desires and to the deep-rooted pursuit of personal happiness that characterizes so many human lives. This is not to say that the qualms of morality should be stifled by the outcries of pleasure, it just means that ethics should reserve room for both. Samuel Johnson was right when he remarked that "we are perpetually moralists"[358] – but we should not be wary of adding to this truth that we are also perpetual pursuers of happiness. It is the permanent dialectical tension between these two tendencies that makes us who we are.

If our existence is always an existence in time, if, so to say, temporality is conditional to us and our acts, we may seek to dress up some lofty realm where this timeliness of our acts is excluded, but if in this lofty realm we end up growing out of touch with the factors of our conditionality in *this* world, we will run the risk of creating an abyss between ourselves and our moral vocabulary. Surely, attempts can be made to bridge this abyss, either horizontally, to bring morality back home to us, or vertically, to lift ourselves up to the higher realm envisioned in and through our noumenal cravings – but the question remains: if we recognize our moral nature as fundamentally conditioned by and in time, if we know timeliness to be our condition, what good will it do to come up with ethical vocabularies that are unable to answer to the demands of this timeliness?

[358] Johnson, Samuel. *Lives of the Poets*. London: Oxford University Press, 1973, vol. 1, p. 72.

I have sought to bring together Nabokov's *Ada* with some of Immanuel Kant's work to single out this problematic in regard to what I called our dialectical frailty, i.e., the essential tension resulting from our deep concern with the pursuit of pleasure and happiness on the one hand, and our desire for absolute moral values on the other. In the concluding section of that chapter, I ended up claiming that one way to make Kant's categorical imperative to do justice to this dialectical frailty, is to reintroduce (some will say: to smuggle back in) some degree of temporality into his ethical philosophy by implementing the notion of futurity in the realm of morality as a conditional term. To do so, I did little else than to take Kant's concept of time from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and transported it to *The Critique of Practical Judgment***,** using Nabokov's *Ada* as a sort of philosophical cargo van.

But even though that van has been unloaded now, and even though I have completed my analyses of Kant and *Ada*,[359] the larger point I'm trying to make with regard to ethics and time still needs elaboration. In the present chapter, I intend to provide such an elaboration through yet another comparative analysis – this time bringing together Nabokov's *Lolita* and Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time.* If in the previous chapter I was mostly concerned with the dialectical frailty and the concept of time as it takes shape in our notion of the future, this chapter will seek to make sense of our moral being as being shaped in, by, and as, a past. For this, we have to definitely leave Kant and his vocabulary: as already indicated, there can be no question of introducing the notion of the past into the Kantian realm of morality. Thus we pass on to our next conversational partner; thus we pass on to Proust.

I will start off with some general remarks about the relation between Nabokov's work and that of Proust. Once these preliminaries are out of the way, we will proceed to an analysis of *Lolita* in terms of Proust's vocabulary in an attempt both to come to a better understanding of Nabokov's novel and to make clear in what way the novel's treatment of the theme of time is central to its ethical understanding.

[359] In the eyes of staunch Kantians and Nabokovians, "completed" will of course sound highly opportunistic – yet, in my defense, I should add that everyone who has moved his or her possessions from one place to the next knows there is only so much one can fit in the restrained bellies of these cargo vans.

6.2. Nabokov and Proust

Nabokov did not like to be compared to fellow authors. In his foreword to the translation of *Invitation to a Beheading*, he remarks that he "could never understand why every book of mine invariably sends reviewers scurrying in search of more or less celebrated names for the purpose of passionate comparison."[360] One of the "more or less celebrated names" that comes up, along with Gogol and "Tostoyevsky," is that of Marcel Proust. Many literary critics however, *have* suggested a link between the works of Vladimir Nabokov and Marcel Proust's magnum opus *In Search of Lost Time*, especially once Nabokov decided to share with his readers his famous list of "masterpieces of the twentieth century," presented in a 1965 interview: "My greatest masterpieces of twentieth century prose are, in this order: Joyce's *Ulysses*, Kafka's *Transformation*, Biely's *Petersburg*, and the first half of Proust's fairy tale *In Search of Lost Time*."[361]

J. E. Rivers, in an article entitled "Proust, Nabokov, and Ada,"[362] states that "[t]hough Proust's work obviously influences the shape and tone of Nabokov's fiction by its presence therein, it does not exert a direct influence upon Nabokov's aesthetic philosophy or upon the formulation of his central themes."[363] He bases this remark on a short survey of mostly literal references to Proust in a variety of works by Nabokov, and on Nabokov's own statement that "he first read Proust with his wife around 1935-1936, at which time […] he had already been formed as a writer and was immune to outside influences."[364] Although Rivers takes Nabokov's assertion on the subject for granted, there is ample reason for doubt.

Brian Boyd cites Nikolay Raevsky, an old friend of Nabokov, against whom, when asked if he liked Proust, Nabokov would have said: "not just like; I simply adore him. I've read all twelve volumes through twice." This scene occurred at least five years earlier, in

[360] *Invitation to a Beheading*, p. viii.
[361] *Strong Opinions*, p. 57.
[362] An article hailed as "the best overall account of Nabokov's relation to Proust" by John Burt Foster Jr. in the authoritative *Garland Companion* (Alexandrov (ed.), *The Garland Companion to Nabokov*, *op. cit.*, p. 480).
[363] Rivers, J. Edwin. "Proust, Nabokov, and Ada." In: Roth, Phyllis A. (ed.). *Critical Essays on Vladimir Nabokov*. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1984, p. 141.
[364] *Ibid*.

1930.[365] Also, John Burt Foster Jr. and Jane Grayson point out that Nabokov's *Laughter in the Dark*, in its original Russian version, published in 1933 and entitled *Kamera Obskura*, contains a lengthy parody of Proust's style and thematic concerns.[366] A third reason why we might want to doubt Nabokov's own assertions on the subject to J. E. Rivers is a statement Nabokov made in 1934, during an interview that was conducted in Russian and is cited by Grayson in the conclusion of her revealing monograph on intra-linguistic transformations in Nabokov's oeuvre. According to this statement, the author "loved Flaubert and Proust."[367] Nabokov adds to this that, curiously, during his Russian youth, he had a predilection for Western authors, whereas now, living in the West, he felt more affiliated to the great authors from the Russian tradition, such as Gogol and Chekhov. Grayson cites this interview to emphasize once more that "Nabokov cannot be neatly fitted into any national pigeon-hole," and this, as many critics have confirmed after her, is a very apt conclusion.[368]

For our purposes here though, the interview unearthed by Grayson serves as yet another example that we should be weary of believing Nabokov when he is telling Rivers that he only started reading Proust at the end of 1935 through 1936. It is hard to say (and ultimately not very important) whether Nabokov consciously tried to hide something from Rivers when the latter visited him in 1973 to talk about Proust, or whether he had just temporarily forgotten "where his Muse was schooled."[369] Yet it seems hard to believe that Nabokov was already "completely formed as a writer" by 1936. It seems that to accept this statement one must have a very remarkable notion of the writer's formation. The formation of the writer, it could (and probably should) be opposed, does not end at any

[365] Cited in: Boyd, *The Russian Years*, *op. cit.*, p. 354.
[366] For Grayson's remarks on the subject, see: Grayson, Jane. *Nabokov Translated: A Comparison of Nabokov's Russian and English Prose*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977. For Foster's take see: Alexandrov (ed.), *Garland Companion*, p. 473.
[367] Interview conducted by Sedykh, in *Poslednie novosti*, 1934, cited in: Grayson, *op. cit.,* p. 218. Nabokov's exact wording, in Russian: "говорят о влиянии на меня немецких писателей, которых я и не знаю. Я ведь вообще плохо читаю по-немецки. Можно гоборить скорее о влиянин французском: я люблю Флобера и Пруста."
[368] *Ibid.*
[369] The expression is Nabokov's own. It can be found in his 1933 poem "Безумец" ("The Madman"), written in Berlin and reprinted in Russian, French, and English in: Nabokov, Vladimir. *Poèmes et problèmes*. Paris: Gallimard, 1999, p. 88.

definite point in time. It is in constant flux and cannot be said to end before the last line of his last book is written.

What about Nabokov's actual body of work though? Does it show any sign of a Proustian presence behind the lines? A large number of critics assume that Proustian aesthetics, in one way or another, have had some sort of effect on Nabokov's novels, and the fact that quite a lot of his characters (Humbert Humbert, Charles Kinbote, Van Veen – to name but some of the more popular ones) explicitly refer to either Marcel or Proust, adds to the credibility of these assumptions.

John Burt Foster, in an article on Nabokov's alleged modernism, cites Proust's *Recherche* as an important influence on the aesthetics of *Pale Fire*, and names Proust's "artistic individualism" as a "corollary to his [Nabokov's] famous credo of aesthetic bliss defined in the afterword to Lolita."[370] The aforementioned J. E. Rivers draws strong parallels between *Ada* and the *Recherche*, and Chloé Deroy in an article on "erudite incest" in *Ada* stops to focus for a moment on the meaning of "the mauve shades of Monsieur Proust."[371] A host of similar accounts for other novels can be found in John Burt Foster's chapter on "Nabokov and Proust" in the *Garland Companion*.[372]

In an attempt to add to the critical work of these predecessors and at the same time to gain more insight into the ethical questions that have been concerning us here, I want to offer in this sixth chapter a comparative study connecting Proust's *Recherche* to Nabokov's *Lolita*. In order to do so, I will study here two characters who are struck by a sense of having lost something precious, and in their desperate condition, are forced to relate themselves in one way or another to this loss. The first character, Humbert Humbert, will fail to relate successfully to his loss, and his tale will end in tragedy. The second character, whose immorality is slyly hidden by the grandiloquent rhetoric on art that Proust dons him with, will find a successful stance, and, as I will argue, is saved from the same tragic fate by a careful scrutiny of the nature of time and his aptness to use the outcome of this scrutiny as a means to overcome his sense of loss.

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[370] Foster, John Burt Jr. "Not T. S. Eliot, but Proust: Revisionary Modernism in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*." In: *Comparative Literature Studies*, vol. 28, no. 1, 1991, p. 64.
[371] Deroy, Chloé. "L'inceste érudit dans *Ada*." In: *Kaleidoscopic Nabokov*. Eds. Lara Delage-Toriel and Monica Manolescu. Paris: Houdiard, 2009, pp. 118-119.
[372] See note 360 above.

6.3. Facts and Problems

Much has been written about Vladimir Nabokov's exiled status and about the fact that he had to deal with the bewildering consequences of being brutally severed off from the country where he passed his childhood, and – perhaps worst of all considering his principal occupation – from what he himself conceived of as his "untrammeled, rich, and infinitely docile Russian tongue."[373] In an article entitled "A 'Safely Solipsized' Life: *Lolita* as Autobiography Revisited," Anna Morlan goes as far as suggesting that in *Lolita*:

> Nabokov succeeds in making his memory speak to us through Humbert Humbert, the novel's faulty narrator, and brings our attention to Nabokov's own experiences of loss and his struggle to recapture and preserve his past, granting himself — as well as the people and places of his past — a sort of immortality, over which he has the final word.[374]

Given the contemporary critical consensus among leading Nabokov scholars, Morlan's suggestion is daring to say the least. Although I do not wish to get entrapped into the sometimes quite heated-up discussion concerning the delicate question concerning Nabokov's presence in his own novels, I *do* want to follow up on Morlan's focus on the experience of loss in *Lolita*, because like Morlan, I believe that an understanding of the problematic of loss has to be central to any understanding of the novel (not to mention Nabokov's oeuvre as a whole). Somewhat tilting the angle of Morlan's analysis though, I want to move from a biographical approach to a more thematic approach. Interestingly enough, it is Nabokov's biographer, Brian Boyd, who puts me on this thematic track: with regard to an early short story, *The Return of the Chorb* (1925), the latter remarks that "no subject would become more uniquely Nabokov's than the preposterous fact that we cannot retain the real past that we have lived through."[375]

A remarkable tension underlies Boyd's phrase: our impossibility to "retain the real past" is a "fact," yet this fact is "preposterous." But why, in fact, is this fact "preposterous"?

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[373] *The Annotated Lolita*, pp. 316-317.
[374] Morlan, Anna. "A 'Safely Solipsized' Life: Lolita as Autobiography Revisited." In: *Miranda*, no. 3 - *Lolita*: Examining "the Underside of the Weave" / *Lolita*: Examiner "l'envers de la toile" - (ed. Marie Bouchet), November 2010.
[375] Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, p. 249.

The word "preposterous" indicates indignation, gives a moral qualification of the fact. But then the question arises: if the "fact" is a fact, should it exasperate us thus? By calling something a fact, we usually mean to indicate that we have understood something about its determination – "that's a fact," we say, and mean we accept whatever the word "fact" refers to as resolutely given.

The fact is a given, but it is not always a gift.[376] We may utter the words "that's a fact" with joy; we may utter them regretfully. But either way, a degree of resignation is in our voice: this is a fact, and it cannot be altered; that's a fact: thus will things be. I repeat my question: *after* the fact, to what use, and with what right, our exasperation? If the fact is that we "cannot retain the real past," it seems to make sense to say: "well, then that is the fact." And yet, we may, and often do, find ourselves adding exasperation to resignation. Are we being preposterous when we complain the fact is preposterous? In a way, yes, but in a way, no. For if the rationale be incoherent, experience does lend truth to this sort of experience. We *do* find ourselves reacting thus to facts, even when we admit that they *are* facts.

Epistemologically we could say that part of the particular richness of human thought can be found in this sort of equivocal reaction – reactions that seem to express multiple judgments without making an attempt to classify these judgments; the result is a sinuous synthesis of judgments that is neither really a unison nor really a juxtaposition of opposite sentiments. In many cases, this sort of state is not endless, and the indeterminacy underlying this kind of "sinuous" synthesis will eventually be resolved. Yet sometimes a deeper tension is brought about. It is in these cases that beyond the epistemological horizon of the problematic, a moral problem starts to loom. Let me explain what I mean somewhat more concretely by returning to the specific problem posed by Boyd: our impossibility to retain the past we have lived through.

My argument is rather simple, and in a sense as old as time itself: I will claim that this failure to retain the real past may become a moral problem once we cannot bring ourselves to somehow come to terms with the impossibility of retaining it. Or, to express

[376] The Christian however, may disagree. To her or him any "fact," any "given," is always a "gift." Not every fact may always *appear* to us as a gift – but any negative given may ultimately be transverted into a positive gift by the perseverance of prayer and the power of faith.

myself in the more abstract terms used above: it is only once we cannot eventually bring ourselves to accept it as fact, that the fact becomes a moral problem. This sounds simple enough, in general, but I want to show what happens when the particular case is less simple.

The aim of the following two sections of this chapter is to show how *Lolita*'s Humbert Humbert suffers from a failure to come to terms with time. I argue that it is a particular set of conceptions concerning the past and its status that leads Humbert into a pursuit that ends in tragic failure. Through a comparison with Proust's *Recherche*, I will try to explore the question if there may be a means of reflection that can be put to use in the process of overcoming such a particular sense of loss appertaining to the failure to accept the unretainability of the past.

6.4. *Lolita*

The story of *Lolita* can and has been summarized in many different ways. As in the case of *Ada*, Nabokov has made it particularly hard to come up with a univocal summary. The main source of the difficulty, like with *Ada*, is the fact that so many of the books passages do not lend themselves to a univocal redescription – Nabokov is a master not just of introducing ambiguity into his prose, but of stacking layer upon layer of ambiguity into almost every single sentence of his later prose.[377] Someone who has very convincingly shown the limits of plumping for one univocal redescription at the cost of many others is Eric Naiman.[378] Most critics agree that *Lolita* can be described as a tale involving a middle-aged European immigrant called Humbert Humbert, who, after a youthful love affair gone awry in Southern France and an unsuccessful marriage in Paris, decides to move to America. Here, Humbert ends up as a lodger in the quiet (or seemingly quiet) New England home of the Haze family, which at the time of his arrival is composed of mother Charlotte and her

[377] I'm using the word "later" here rather freely, and not in the more specific sense Michael Wood gave to it when he speaks of "Nabokov's late fiction" in *The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov* (Connolly, Julian W. (ed.), see p. 200ff.). I take it to include everything he wrote from *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* onwards.
[378] See, especially, the chapters "Reading Chernyshevsky in Tehran" and "Lolita in the Real World" in: Naiman, *Nabokov, Perversely*, *op. cit.*, p. 135ff. and p. 148ff.

twelve-year old daughter Lolita. From this point onwards however, it seems safe to say that (at least from a moral perspective) broadly two kinds of readings exist.

On the first kind of reading, the rest of the tale gives a description of how Humbert, once Charlotte is dead and out of the way (either by Humbert's own doing or, as he claims himself, by a favor of fate), deprives Lolita of the remainder of her youth, by abducting her and abusing her, both sexually and emotionally. In the end Lolita manages to escape from all this viciousness, and, after a (no less morally gruesome) detour ends up with an ordinary man in a quiet town before dying (according to *Lolita*'s fictional editor John Ray Jr., PhD) in childbirth at a much too early age. On this reading, Humbert is a villain, and *Lolita* a story of gross depravity. Elizabeth Patnoe is one critic who has made a strong case for this sort of reading in her "Discourse, Ideology, and Hegemony: The Double Dramas in and around Lolita,"[379] arguing that *Lolita* is to be read as a story of violent child abuse. According to Patnoe, the actual text of *Lolita* offers lots of evidence to convict Humbert as a violent pedophile, and if not all readers are aware of this, it is because they let themselves be misled by Humbert's romantic rhetoric.[380]

Another group of readers, however,[381] conclude that *Lolita* is something wholly different. On their account, *Lolita* is a love story with a tragic ending, for both Humbert and Lolita. The conflict between the critics belonging to this latter group and those belonging to the former group often seems to revolve around a narratological question: Humbert himself claims to have "loved" Lolita – but at the same time, we have ample reason to believe Humbert is not the most reliable of narrators – so who are we to believe?[382]

This is an interesting question, but it seems fundamentally unanswerable. Moreover, the fact that it is unanswerable is ostensibly part of the game Nabokov is playing with his readers in *Lolita*. Those who say that Humbert Humbert's statement concerning his love for Lolita must be reconsidered on the grounds that he is an unreliable narrator will eventually be forced to admit that in fact *all* of the story of *Lolita* may have to be reconsidered. The typology of the unreliable narrator is determinate, the unreliability is presented as an

[379] Patnoe, Elizabeth. "Discourse, Ideology, and Hegemony: The Double Dramas in and around Lolita." In: *Discourse and Ideology in Nabokov's Prose* (ed. David H. J. Larmour). London: Routledge, 2002.
[380] Patnoe, *Discourse, Ideology, and Hegemony*, pp. 113-114.
[381] I give no references here, but will specify some of the readers of this group over the course of the chapter.
[382] The notion of the "unreliable narrator," coined by literary scholar Wayne Booth, is often used in this context. See his widely cited: *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1961.

essential quality, so: once an unreliable narrator, always an unreliable narrator. We are on a gliding scale here, for, unfortunately for us, Humbert is the only authorial source we have for this story: if you say you cannot accept this or that aspect of his account on the ground of him being an "unreliable narrator," might not someone ask you: "but if you think he is unreliable, why did you believe the story in the first place? Have you never worried that *all* of it was made up?"

Now the point with regard to a moral assessment of *Lolita* is this: if we advance Humbert's unreliability as an argument in our *moral* evaluation of the book, we are in fact retracting the ground from any moral assessment of the book as such. Of course, we can say: Humbert is unreliable, and this, as such, we deem to be morally incorrect. But that is an altogether different discussion. The moral question we are asking here is: is this a story about love, or is it a story about sexual abuse of children? Those who opt for the latter alternative will claim that contrary to what Humbert's wily romantic discourse may induce us to believe, this *is* a story about sexual abuse of children, because when Humbert is saying he loved Lolita, he is only *saying* it, and when some critics *say* that *Lolita* is about love, it only goes to show that they are led astray by the shrewdness of Humbert's rhetoric; however, this group of critics apparently fails to see that Humbert is not to be trusted when he says these things, for *in reality*, he is an unreliable narrator. But what if someone opposed: "if you believe he is *only saying* these things, because he is unreliable, why do you believe him at all? For if he is, as you say, unreliable, than you shouldn't believe him at all. Why not just put the book down?"

Let me rephrase all this in more concrete terms. Just for the sake of argument: assume Humbert is an unreliable narrator. Assume he is, as he says himself, mentally ill, and cannot be trusted. It has to be admitted: the proposition "I loved her" with regard to Lolita might be misleading. Now make your moral assessment. Something like: Humbert is a villain. But then ask yourself this: if he was misleading you here (concerning his love), could he have been misleading you elsewhere? For example: when he said Lolita was twelve years old, could that have been a figment? Maybe he just *said* that. Maybe he made it up, like he made up many other details of the story. Assume now, that Lolita was maybe not 12, but 32 years old. This is still a safe and perfectly allowed assumption to make, parting from the premise that Humbert is mentally ill and an unreliable narrator. Now turn back to

your moral judgment: Humbert is a villain, for he engaged in sexual intercourse with Lolita, and if he said it was because he loved her, and is describing these sexual scenes in romantic terms, we should not believe him for he is not to be trusted with what he said. Well, if he is not to be trusted for what he says, it follows that we might not want to trust him when he says Lolita's age is twelve either. And if we cannot establish that this is her age, and that she might, in reality, for all we know, be thirty-two years old instead of twelve, Humbert retracting twenty years from her actual age just for the sake of the story, or maybe just to rattle our moral cages (who knows?), well, in that case, the ground for our moral indictment evaporates. That is to say: the ground for the particular moral indictment we were after (we can still morally condemn other parts of his behavior on this scenario, such as his lying for example).

Let me be clear: I have no sophistical intentions here. It is not my aim to show here that the concept of unreliability can be used in such a way as to guard Humbert from moral scrutiny. All I'm trying to say is that once you start tying up your moral judgment of *Lolita* with the narratological problematic of the unreliable narrator, your argument will inevitably lose reliability. You will still be able to claim that Humbert is a liar, and arguably a very perverse one at that, but you will not be able to prove apodictically that he is a child abuser. Speaking of liars, the problem is not unlike Epimenides' famous paradox of the liar. And I think it is not completely unfair to say that, what has been keeping up the disagreement amongst many Nabokovians, is failure to recognize the paradox as fundamentally unresolvable. I'm of course oversimplifying the matter, but in a very general way it seems not wholly besides the mark to remark that one group has been arguing that when a liar says he is lying, we should believe him, whereas the other has been arguing that we should not. As we know after more than two centuries of philosophy, and roughly six decades of Nabokov studies: we still can't tell who's right.[383]

The focus on *Lolita*'s narrative techniques helps us to understand that *Lolita,* as a work of fiction narrated by a fictional author, is inherently tainted with a certain unreliability. Yet we cannot use this piece of "narratological knowledge" to back up any

[383] The reason is simple: have a paradox function as the central premise in an argument, and anything can be proved, yet nothing can be proved. If you want a discussion to be endless, this has a proved a solid strategy to adopt. If you want to come up with forceful moral judgments however, it's not half as useful.

moral claims we might want to make with regard to the action of the novel. So if such a "narratological turn" does not really help us to form an ethical judgment with regard to *Lolita*, is there any other direction we can turn in? I think there is, and I think the road where this turn leads has been conveniently paved by what might be the two most assiduous and perceptive readers the novel has ever had: Brian Boyd and Richard Rorty. These readers, instead of basing their moral judgments upon elaborate redescriptions of the text, have sought to extrapolate their moral judgments more directly from *Lolita*'s text, by approaching the text as the specific fiction it is, and by listening more patiently to what it had to tell them.[384]

Both of them have centered in their moral evaluation of *Lolita* upon Humbert's deep-seated disregard for the lives of the people surrounding him. Boyd remarks that Humbert is "brutally indifferent to other lives"[385] and Richard Rorty makes this aspect of Humbert's character his main characteristic when he cites Humbert's "inattentiveness to anything irrelevant to his own obsession" as the most important reason we can bring forward for a condemnation of Humbert as an immoral human being.[386] One can agree with this up to a certain extent.[387] Humbert's inadvertence *can* provide the key to our comprehension of much that is at stake in the ethical potencies of the novel. However, as I have argued before, "inadvertency" or "indifference" are much too vague notions for ethics to work with. What we should be striving to come up with, then, is some kind of narrative

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[384] This does not mean that Boyd's final moral evaluation is any more positive than, for example, Patnoe's. It is just as harsh and condemning, but, I would say, for more solidly founded reasons. I am aware that the words "more directly" and "more patiently" might sound suspicious to deconstructionist ears. The proprietors of such ears might oppose that what my claim here boils down to, is a disqualification of one person's reading at the expense of another person's reading on the basis of a distinction between readings that are faithful to the original text, and readings that aren't. They may have a point in saying that this sort of distinction can be easily deconstructed (ultimately, it probably can). But the reason I'm interposing the quantitative word "more" is precisely because instead of making a distinction, I prefer to just introduce a level of degree. I think a good case can be made for preferring an argument such as Boyd's or Rorty's, where the weight of the moral conclusions is made to rest on probing the text of *Lolita* itself, to an argument such as Patnoe's, where the weight of the moral conclusion is made to lean on such things as external narratological notions imposed on the text from without, and resulting redescriptions of the text in the form of "personal accounts." For such a personal account, though, see: Patnoe, *Discourse, Ideology, and Hegemony*, pp. 116-117. The reader should be warned that what she will find in it is rather violent and contains explicit obscenity. For Rorty's and Boyd's accounts, see references below.

[385] Boyd, *The American Years*, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

[386] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, *op. cit.,* pp. 162-163.

[387] Questions concerning the ultimate validity of Rorty's argument on the whole are extensively discussed in chapter 3, above.

that helps to *explain* this indifference to the lives of others, some sort of analysis that might bring to the fore the underlying causes of the sort of behavior that causes us to get preoccupied with our own personal desires to such an extent as to blind ourselves to the consequences which the realization of these desires might entail for others.

Brian Boyd's moral evaluation of *Lolita* is on a par with Rorty's. But, having a somewhat broader scope of interest than Rorty, he also remarks, as he has done in connection with much of Nabokov's other work, that the irretrievability of the past is one of *Lolita*'s central themes and that "Humbert's love for Lolita […] reflects the theme of the irretrievable past" – not just as a reincarnation of his childhood love Annabel, but also as an independent object of desire.[388]

Now what if we combined Rorty's insight about the pivotal importance of Humbert's inadvertency and Boyd's assertion of the irretrievability of the past being a main theme in *Lolita*? Taking both of them to have observed something of importance in Nabokov's novel, I will try to tie their observations together to back up the statement I made at the beginning of this section, namely, that Humbert's moral failure is to be related to his failure to come to terms with time, or, more specifically, his desire to retrieve what is, to rewrite Boyd's earlier statement, factually though preposterously irretrievable: the past.

To do so, we need to shift our focus from general remarks about *Lolita* to the text itself, and take a closer look at some of its passages. I'll start with this one:

> It was the same child – the same frail, honey-hued shoulders, the same silky supple bare back, the same chestnut head of hair. A polka-dotted black kerchief tied around her chest hid from aging ape eyes, but not from the gaze of young memory, the juvenile breasts I had fondled one immortal day […] I find it most difficult to express with adequate force that flash, that shiver, that impact of passionate recognition […] while I passed by her in my adult disguise (a great big handsome hunk of movieland manhood), the vacuum of my soul managed to suck in every detail of her bright beauty, and these I checked against the features of my dead bride. A little later of course, she, this **nouvelle,** this Lolita, **my** Lolita, was to eclipse completely her prototype.[389]

[388] Boyd, *The American Years*, p. 238.
[389] *The Annotated Lolita*, pp. 39-40. Emphasis in original.

This fragment describes Humbert's first encounter with Lolita, the very first time he sees her. As is clear, this encounter brings back images from his unfinished childhood love affair with Annabel, whom death snatched away from him prematurely. Most commentators (and this particular passage has had too many to name), conclude, with Humbert, that this is a penumbral moment indeed and that from here on, Lolita does "eclipse her prototype," thus forming the beginning of Humbert's infatuation with Lolita.

I agree with all these commentators, but there is one important point I want to focus on. It concerns the emphasis (Nabokov's or Humbert's emphasis) on the word "my." This emphasis on "*my* Lolita" is one of the keys to this passage. It repeats the rest of the passage in a condensed form, and sheds a new light on the nature of this meeting: upon a closer reading, this meeting proves to be something more, or in fact less, than just a regular meeting between two different persons. What appears to be taking place here is Humbert encountering another human being and transforming her into something he wants her to be. In his description of her, he describes her in terms that do not refer to her own identity, but in terms that refer to an image of a past love he carries inside of himself. Note the recurrent use of the words "the same" in the phrase that describes Humbert's first reaction. Note how Humbert's soul "sucks in" Lolita, and then reshapes her to the image of Annabel. And note how, finally, she becomes *his* Lolita. Referring to the process of Humbert getting to know Lolita in terms of "an anthropologist reporting an alien life,"[390] as someone like Boyd does, seems to me to not completely to do justice to the situation: Humbert never even meets the real Lolita, and instead of approaching her as one would approach alien life, he sets out to internalize, to make this other person's life *his,* from the very beginning. Using the vocabulary of the postmodernists, we could say that Humbert has no eye for Lolita's difference; he is obsessed by elements of sameness (note again the repetition of the adjective "same").

Surely, we may believe Humbert when he says that *this* Lolita soon eclipses her predecessor, but it is indeed *that* particular Lolita, *his* Lolita, that does the taking over. And *this* Lolita is not the actual Lolita, on the contrary: it is an appropriated image of her that accounts for the fact that Humbert is blind to the real Lolita, the one he has violent sexual

[390] Boyd, *The American Years*, p. 236.

intercourse with for years in a row, and whose sobbing he ignores. The fact that Humbert's image of these happenings is inspired by, is partly made up of, beautiful memories of a pristine relationship of the past is important, but in no way does this exonerate Humbert from the claims of criminality laid against him. The fact that they are inspired by a past is important, but only because it teaches us something about the causes of Humbert's transgressions, i.e., that it is his fixed stare on the past that makes him so disregardful of the present, and, for that case, the future. It is his blind love for a dead girl from his past that makes Humbert commit the crimes he commits: it is this blindness toward the present inspired by an obsession with the past that explains his utter failure to have eye for the present, and the present harm he is eventually to do to Lolita (and many other people surrounding him).

To return to the question of Humbert's "love" for Lolita: it is on these grounds that we may also be able to decide about that particular question. I have already referred briefly to a second group of readers who have argued to read *Lolita* not as the sordid account of a pedophile, but as a love story. "*Lolita* is about love" and "in recent fiction, no lover has thought of his beloved with so much tenderness" (as Humbert in *Lolita*), not the least of literary critics, Lionel Trilling, has argued.[391] Additionally, various other critics have defended an image of Humbert as a tragic lover, of someone who is desperately in love with a little girl named Lolita, who, tragically, does not care about him as much as he about her. Humbert is "a man of taste and culture who can only love little girls," whereas Lolita is a "dreadful little creature, selfish, hard, vulgar, and foul-tempered," Dorothy Parker has stated.[392] Nona Balakian, finally, affirms that "while Humbert languishes in the sweet transport and rapture of love," it is Lolita who "cynically and selfishly appropriates Humbert's passion" and thus is "the real aggressor."[393]

Despite and possibly against the assertions of these critics, there appears to be something fundamentally wrong with defining the relationship between Humbert and Lolita in terms of love. As indicated before, I think the argument between what I called the

[391] Trilling, Lionel. "The Last Lover: Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita." Cited from: *Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita: Modern Critical Interpretations* (ed. Harold Bloom). New York: Chelsea House, 1987, pp. 5-11.
[392] Parker, Dorothy. "Sex – Without the Asterisks." In: *Esquire*, vol. 50, no. 4, October 1958, p. 103.
[393] Balakian, Nona. "The Prophetic Voyage of the Anti-Heroine." In: *Southwest Review*, vol. 47, no. 1, winter 1962, pp. 140-141.

"first" and "second" group of readers cannot be decided by invoking trust or mistrust to believe in such assertions made by Humbert as his (somewhat melodramatic) exclamation made towards the end of the novel: "I loved you. I was a pentapod monster, but I loved you. I was despicable and brutal, and turpid, and everything, *mais je t'aimais, je t'aimais!*"[394] *Lolita*'s moral question cannot be resolved by deciding to believe or not to believe Humbert here. However, we may still want to assert that Humbert is *wrong* in believing *he* loved Lolita. A more fruitful way of backing up this assertion, then, is by proving that there is something wrong with the notion of love as Humbert envisions it. Thus we might point out that there is a discrepancy between the use of the word "love" in this fragment and in those quotes by Trilling et al., and what we might sensibly expect the word "love" to convey. I'll elaborate.

The key to my argument is, again, my estimation of Humbert's failure to recognize Lolita as a separate person, a person with an identity of her own. But let me first ask: what may we expect the word "love" to convey? Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas provides what seems like an adequate description of the concept of love in his *Le temps et l'autre*. He compares our authentic relation to the other in terms of a relation to the future, a relation that is characterized by the fact that that to which we are related, is as unknowable to us as our own death.[395] Somewhat further on, discussing the phenomenon of love and the way it defines a relationship between a male person and a female person, he writes:

> Le pathétique de l'amour consiste dans une dualité insurmontable des êtres. C'est une relation avec ce qui se dérobe à jamais. La relation ne neutralise pas ipso facto l'altérité, mais la conserve. […] L'autre en tant qu'autre n'est pas ici un objet qui devient nôtre ou qui devient nous ; il se retire au contraire dans son mystère. [396]

Humbert however, never does conserve Lolita's alterity. As I have shown above, he never even recognizes it. In his encounter with Lolita, Humbert strives to make her *his*, as soon as

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[394] *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 284.
[395] Levinas, *Le Temps et l'Autre, op. cit.*, p. 74.
[396] Levinas, *Le Temps et l'Autre*, p. 78. English translation: "The pathos of love, however, consists in an insurmountable duality of beings. It is a relationship with what always slips away. The relationship does not *ipso facto* neutralize alterity but preserves it. […] The other as other is not here an object that becomes ours or becomes us, to the contrary, it withdraws into its mystery." Source: Levinas, Emmanuel. *Time and the Other and Additional Essays* (transl. Richard A. Cohen). Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987, p. 86.

possible, treating her as an object that can be, once internalized, used to retrieve an otherwise irretrievable past. Levinas remarks: in an authentic relationship between two lovers, there always has to be something that "withdraws into its own mystery." Nothing of the mystery or of this withdrawal is found in *Lolita*. Humbert, in his wild fits of desire, only strives to possess Lolita, and through her, to realize the satisfaction of a forlorn craving.[397]

But the fact that Humbert is blind to Lolita's otherness, to that which constitutes her as a person, does not mean that he is completely devoid of conscience. Indeed, the reason he manages to convince so many people, including himself, that he loved Lolita, may well be found in his success to portray himself as someone who is at times aware of his own misdoings. But awareness alone never suffices as a moral argument: I may be aware of hurting someone, but this awareness is of no influence on the depths of the actual wounds I am inflicting – there will always remain a glaring gap between the awareness of an action and its manifestation in reality.

The inverse implication however, is that the notion of unawareness cannot suffice to round up a moral argument either. Let us take an even closer look at Humbert, in order to elaborate on this point: that to explain Humbert's moral wrongdoings only in terms of his disregard for other people would be too rash. As indicated before, I do not think Rorty is completely wrong in his claims, but his claims are limited in their reach and they can only take us so far. Humbert can be very attentive and conscientious at times, and if I earlier expressed my doubts about Boyd's comparison of Humbert with an anthropologist, it was merely because I believe he advanced it in the wrong place.

However, to rely on the word "disregard" in our moral assessment of Humbert's behavior only starts to make sense when we define this word in a certain way. If Humbert cannot be said to be disregardful *all the time*, this means we have to find out what makes that sometimes he is, and sometimes he is not. Let us read another passage from *Lolita*:

> She was thinner and taller, and for a second it seemed to me her face was less pretty than the mental imprint I had cherished for more than a month; her cheeks looked hollowed and too much lentigo camouflaged her rosy rustic features; and that first impression […] carried the clear implication that

[397] To stress the violence of this desire, reference could also be made to the scene where Humbert speaks of his desire to turn Lolita inside out, and fondle her kidneys.

> all widower Humbert had to do, wanted to do, or would do, was to give this wan-looking though sun-colored little orphan **aux yeux battus** (and even those plumbaceous umbrae under her eyes bore freckles) a sound education, a healthy and happy girlhood, a clean home, nice girlfriends of her age [...]. But "in a wink," as the Germans say, the angelic line of conduct was erased, and I overtook my prey (time moves ahead of our fancies), and she was my Lolita again – in fact, more of my Lolita than ever.[398]

We read here how Humbert, his plans and pills at the ready, experiences a brief moment ("a very narrow human interval between two tiger heartbeats") of doubt. Retrieving Lolita after her period of absence at Camp Q, Humbert actually notices that there is a difference between the Lolita he had stored in his mind and the present Lolita that walks up to him right now; for the shimmer of an instant, Humbert recognizes Lolita for the afflicted little girl she is. He considers the possibility of treating her accordingly to this new-discovered identity. But it takes only an instant for him to "overtake his prey" again, and to make her "my Lolita" once more. So the violent process is repeated, Lolita is deprived of her otherness yet again, turned into the object of lust Humbert wants her to be, and Humbert recklessly carries through the proceedings of the crime he is to commit.

Somewhere along the course of this scene, Humbert seems to go astray. At first, he is, for once, attentive to Lolita, and notices that she might be suffering. But then, all of a sudden, he lapses back into his old state of disregard. Why? As stated already at the beginning of this chapter, I think the explanation is to be found in Humbert's disturbed relationship with time. Somewhere near the end of the novel, Humbert tells us that he has published an essay on "Mimir and Memory":

> In which I suggested among other things [...] a theory of perceptual time based on the circulation of the blood and conceptually depending (to fill up this nutshell) on the mind's being conscious not only of matter but also of its own self, thus creating a continuous spanning of two points (the storable future and the stored past).[399]

[398] *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 111.
[399] *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 260.

Now at first, this passage might strike the reader as nothing but a merry piece of playful pedantry, just one more occasion of Humbert boasting about his never-ending ability to get the better of his fellow scholars. But what if we tried to take him seriously here? Might this passage contain a clue to what is at the core of Humbert's problem? Let's try to make sense of his theory. Taking a closer look at this fragment, it seems to be more than just quasi-philosophical doodling – it seems to point to an essential characteristic of Humbert himself.

The importance of the quote does not consist in what may be concluded from it theoretically, but in that which, beyond the surface level of its mock argumentation, may be found in the shift of images that it presents. By this I mean the fact that the first part of this phrase brings together two realms that are usually separated on a conceptual level: time and the material body. Humbert merges and mixes an image of the body ("the circulation of the blood") with the image of time, and by doing so hints at something that is crucial to the understanding of his own predicament.

As we know by now, Humbert's corporal desires for Lolita are closely intertwined with his highly romantic and idealistic desire for his lost Annabel. Now this "theory of perceptual time based on the circulation of the blood" brings together just these elements: intangible time merges with material blood. Humbert's nympholepsy (or as we might say: "his material failing") cannot be taken separately from his impossibility to accept the impossibility to retrieve lost time (his failure to comprehend the nature of time). This rather strange passage might thus hint at something of a broader importance: at the fact that Humbert's pedophilia (or better: nympholepsy) is by no means an isolated disorder.[400]

Humbert Humbert's nympholepsy can be conceived of as a symptom – a symptom of his broader struggle to come to terms with time, and his troubled relationship with Lolita as but an epiphenomenon of his troubled relationship with time. The fact that he does not recognize Lolita *as* Lolita, is because he defines her in terms of something that she is not: the image of a past love. We have heard Humbert say that Lolita is to "eclipse her prototype"; but over the course of the story it turns out this does not mean at all that

[400] The reference to Mimir in the title of the essay may serve more than the purpose of euphonic gratification alone. For Mimir's – literally "the rememberer" in Old Norse – ending is, like Humbert's, tragic. Mimir is decapitated because the people around Hoenir, whom he was supposed to provide with wise counsel, think he is growing too dependent on his counselor. Lolita, in a similar sense, may be emotionally decapitated by Humbert, because he grows too dependent on her.

Humbert falls in love with an independent, particular person who carries the name Lolita. It means that his desire to retrieve a lost love affair stirs up again, and that he does not mind *using* this person to help him realize this desire. And Humbert, "drunk on the impossible past,"[401] never fully realizes the damage he has done until the very end of the novel, when he describes his reminiscence of a moment when he peered out from a ledge above an abyss and states that:

> What I heard was but the melody of children at play [...] I stood listening to that musical vibration from my lofty slope, to those flashes of separate cries with a kind of demure murmur for background, and then I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita's absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord."[402]

Only now does Humbert realize that he has taken away Lolita's childhood. In spite of the placating melodramatic vigor with which Humbert describes this final feeling of compunction, he is still not cured from his tragic infliction. It is obvious that Humbert feels genuine regret, but the ultimate tragedy of Humbert's story lies in the fact that this is not where he ends it. He in fact adds two more pages, and explains how he has wished with his narrative to immortalize his Lolita in his art. "I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita."[403]

Once more, Humbert shows a belief in a possibility to protect a relationship from the claws and fangs of time. At last, he thinks he has found the solution in "the refuge of art." But the text he has just written proves his own wrong on this point: for upon rereading it, we may discover that it relates but the ill-fated life of a man who in his obsessive quest for something he lost in the past, fails to achieve a life lived in the present. Narrating the past may serve as a lucid attempt to transform it into art, but it does not suffice to save or retain it any better than human consciousness does. For even if we ourselves have lived our past, we do not own it anymore, and it is not at our command. We are only in command of the present, but absorbed by the past, we may fail to realize this. A constant occupation with

[401] *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 282.
[402] *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 308.
[403] *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 309.

the past results in a trifling away of the the present, in "wasting time" as common parlance has it, and finally, in wasting life itself.

Thus the deeper element of tragedy in *Lolita* is not Humbert ending up in an impossible love-relationship, with Lolita after years of suffering finally deciding to flee from him. Infinitely more tragic than that tragedy itself, are the underlying causes on which it feeds, the forces that keep it going. Humbert's underlying problem is of a temporal nature, and it is his failure to come up with a multi-dimensional conception of time, his failure to come (so to speak) to terms with time, that comes to form the faulty foundation for his fall. *Lolita*'s tragedy can be said to consist in Humbert not realizing that, while he is trying to retrieve the past, he is losing the present. A blind fixation on the past is causing the present to turn into a nightmare and the future to collapse – not just Lolita's future, but also Humbert's own future, Charlotte's future, Rita's future and Quilty's future. Thus it is not the failed relationship with Lolita, but a failed relationship with time, and the disastrous consequences this failure entails, that constitute the essential note of tragedy sounded in Lolita.

6.5. Proust and Nabokov

We have seen Humbert collapse under the heavy load of memory and brought off balance by the burden of the past; we have witnessed him totter and tumble into the depths of his tragedy. We have seen how, due to a misconception about the nature of time, he has been lured into adhering to a set of beliefs, principles and desires that prove to be fatal to his and other people's well-being. But now I want to return to the moral question I set out to answer at the beginning of this section: could time-haunted Humbert have been protected from his fall? Is there anything that could have saved him and those surrounding him from despair and, eventually, death? I think there is, and, as I have said before, I think possible salvation could have been found in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. If the main problematic may be identified as a failure to come to terms with time, Marcel Proust might just offer the kind of wisdom that is needed to overcome such failure.

Proust's narrator Marcel, whose beloved Albertine dies in a horse-riding accident, finds himself in the same sort of predicament as Humbert Humbert, and experiences

similar problems in his ordeal to find a way to cope with his sense of loss. Marcel's solution consists in finding a way of dealing with the sense of having lost someone precious through a sly *redefinition* of the concept of time itself, so as to make it suit his aims a little better.

How has Nabokov's *Lolita* been related to Proust's *Recherche* in the past*?* That there is some sort of connection between the two has been remarked at least since the publication of the first English review of the book. Written by John Hollander for the *Partisan Review* in 1956, about a year after *Lolita*'s appearance in Paris and two years before its first appearance overseas, this review describes the style of the novel as "alternat[ing] elements of Turgenev and mock Proust, rigorous Constant-like *analyse de l'amour* and parody and pastiche."[404] However, as subsequent criticism has shown, there is more than one way *Lolita* can be related to Proust's *Recherche*. Lucy Maddox, for example, writes that although "the strategies and intentions of the two books are clearly different. […] [T]he treatments of love and desire in *Lolita* and *Remembrance of Things Past* are similar."[405] In a similar vein, David Jones, points out that both "Proust's narrator and Humbert Humbert pursue an elusive ideal woman" while "the essential narrative concerns their jealous efforts to capture and retain an actual woman."[406]

Indeed, Humbert's "persecution mania,"[407] his madly passionate pursuit of Lolita, appears to resonate with certain elements of Marcel's obsession with Albertine, or even, earlier on in *Remembrance of Things Past*, the hysterical fits of fear and jealousy Swann is in thrall to during the budding stage of his relationship with Odette. But, as David L. Jones remarks, whereas Humbert's fate-stricken relationship with Annabel transforms into perversion and the ensuing pedophilic relationship with Lolita, Proust's narrator's nympholepsy remains "technically chaste."[408] Which is why Jones, stating that "the important sexual perversion in Proust's story […] is not the narrator's but Albertine's,"

[404] I cite from the reprinted version in: Page, Norman (ed.). *Vladimir Nabokov: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge, 1982, p. 82.
[405] Maddox, Lucy. *Nabokov's Novels in English*. London: Croon Helm, 1983, p. 78.
[406] Jones, David. "Dolorès Disparue." In: *Symposium*, vol. 20, no. 2, summer 1966, p. 137.
[407] *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 238.
[408] "Proust's narrator retains a marked (if technically chaste) interest in young girls," Jones writes (*Dolores Disparue*, *op. cit.* p. 136). As we will see later on in this chapter, there may be reasons to suppose that this observation stops somewhat short of the truth.

chooses to focus instead on the themes of love and jealousy in the light of what he reckons to be a more prominent perversion in the *Recherche*.[409]

Malcolm Bowie, however, in his "Proust Among the Stars," does pay a little more attention to the narrator's attention for little girls, and calls those passages in the *Recherche* that concern young girls or even very young girls "passages which discover the enticements of Lolita long before Lolita."[410] Citing a few of these passages as examples, Bowie argues that Proust's narrator teaches us that "the adult seducer of children suffers from a nostalgic infatuation with his own lost youth"[411] and that "pansexual Proust's" ultimate lesson is that "monsters are human too […] and the cruel extremities of desire, together with its waywardness, its dissidence […] must all be moulded into the unstoppable sexual frieze."[412] This position seems to join the position of Harold Bloom, who has repeatedly compared Proust to Freud, most notably in an editorial introduction to a collection of critical essays pithily entitled *Marcel Proust*.[413]

Freud opposed to the rigid model of Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* (which was based on a set of sharp distinctions between normal sexual behavior and deviant sexual behavior) a new model of sexual perversion – a model that replaces the qualitative distinction between normality and deviance by a set of quantitative distinctions aiming to define forms of "deviant" behavior in terms of the "normative." Freud himself gives a clear formulation of this principle at the end of his *Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie*, when he explains that he has found out that the condition which characterizes a putatively deviant person, is in fact nothing like the morbid or mysterious condition we attribute to him or her, but a simple prolongation of something common and universal in all human beings.[414]

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[409] Jones, *Dolorès Disparue*, p. 136.
[410] Bowie, Malcolm. *Proust Among the Stars*. London: Harper Collins/Fontana, 1998, p. 233.
[411] Bowie, *Proust Among the Stars*, p. 234.
[412] Bowie, *Proust Among the Stars*, p. 238.
[413] Bloom, Harold (ed.). *Marcel Proust*. New Haven: Chelsea House Publishers (Modern Critical Views Collection), 1987, pp. 1-16.
[414] See for example: Freud, Sigmund. *Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie*. In: *Gesammelte Werke V*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 1968 (1905), p. 132. Here, he writes: "Wir fanden so, daß bei diesen Personen die Neigungen zu allen Perversionen als unbewußte Mächte nachweisbar sind und sich als Symptombildner verraten, und konnten sagen, die Neurose sei gleichsam ein Negativ der Perversion. Angesichts der nun erkannten großen Verbreitung der Perversionsneigungen drängte sich uns der Gesichtspunkt auf, daß die Anlage zu den Perversionen die ursprüngliche allgemeine Anlage des menschlichen Geschlechtstriebes sei, aus welcher das normale Sexualverhalten infolge organischer Veränderungen und psychischer Hemmungen im Laufe der Reifung entwickelt werde."

Thus, what is deviant will be characterized by that which was previously held to be of the order of the normal, and the discourse on sexual perversion, traditionally gathered around an unbridgeable abyss between the normal and the deviant, is now relocated towards the shaky bridge spanning those depths. The "common dispositions" (*allgemeine Anlage*) that are at the base of what we call sexual aberrations are in fact present in all of us, the difference being that some of us have safely stowed these dispositions in the folds of our unconsciousness, whereas others have not. These others we have come to call "perverse," but they are not radically different from ourselves – we share the same "dispositions," and "their perversions" are as much a product of them as is "our normalcy."

There are many passages in the *Recherche* which echo this deconstructive aspect of Freud's theory. To cite one of them:

> Du reste, à cause justement de cet individuel auquel on s'acharne, les amours pour les personnes sont déjà un peu des aberrations. (Et les maladies du corps elles-mêmes, du moins celles qui tiennent d'un peu près au système nerveux, ne sont-elles pas des espèces de goûts particuliers ou d'effrois particuliers contractés par nos organes, nos articulations, qui se trouvent ainsi avoir pris pour certains climats une horreur aussi inexplicable et aussi têtue que le penchant que certains hommes trahissent pour les femmes par exemple qui portent un lorgnon, ou pour les écuyères ? Ce désir, que réveille chaque fois la vue d'une écuyère, qui dira jamais à quel rêve durable et inconscient il est lié […] ?) Or les aberrations sont comme des amours où la tare maladive a tout recouvert, tout gagné. Même dans la plus folle, l'amour se reconnaît encore.[415]

[415] Proust, Marcel. *Le Temps Retrouvé*. In: *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Paris: Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), 1954, tome III, pp. 839-840. In what follows, all references with regard to Proust's text are to the same edition Nabokov (or Kinbote) explicitly refers to in *Pale Fire* (see chapter 7 below), i.e., the French edition just cited and published in three volumes by the *Bibliothèque de la Pléiade* in 1954. As in the case of Bergson earlier, we must assume that Nabokov's own familiarity here was predominantly with the original text, and it is thus the French text upon which my commentary and analysis rests here. Longer block quotations over the course of the text, however, will be accompanied by their English translation in accompanying notes for the sake of convenience. For the sake of continuity and clarity, quotations from the works of Emmanuel Levinas are displayed in a similar fashion over the course of this chapter. In the case of the quote above, the translation reads: "In that love of one creature towards whom one's whole being is urged, there is already something of aberration. And are not the very diseases of the body, at least those closely associated with the nervous system, in some measure peculiar tastes or peculiar fears contracted by our organs, by our articulation, which thus discover for themselves a horror of certain climates as inexplicable and as obstinate as the fancy certain men display for a woman who wears an eyeglass, or for circus-riders? Who shall ever say with what lasting and curious dream that desire aroused time after time at the sight of a circus rider, is associated; as unconscious and as mysterious as is, for example, the influence of a certain town, in appearance similar to others but in which a lifelong sufferer from asthma is able, for the first time, to breathe freely. Aberrations are like passions which a morbid strain has overlaid, yet, in the craziest of

Proust's narrator explains that in fact, because we can only be in love with an individual person, every form of love should be considered to be "an aberration." There is no such thing as a "normal" or "healthy" love. Talking about how some men always fall in love with women sharing a specific quality, such as those "wear[ing] an eyeglass," he compares this to the development of certain physical maladies. What we tend to perceive of as "healthy" infatuations (with a woman wearing a *lorgnon*), the narrator shows, could just as well be described as aberrative or perverse relationships, and he goes even further: the nature of the phenomenon of love is such that a relationship can *only be* perverse. There is no such thing as a healthy relationship. Love, because it implies attachment to an individual, can only be conceived of in terms of aberration and perversity.

Proust, so it seems, passes even beyond Freud, snatching us off the aforementioned shaky bridge and hurling us straight into the abyss. His novel portrays a world in which no one is able to escape from the original position sketched by Freud. If Freud deconstructs Krafft-Ebing's moral universe by deconstructing its categorical oppositions, Proust replaces it with a new moral universe altogether. As Proust's narrator guides us through this universe, it gradually darkens when we are confronted with a wide set of inversions and aberrations ranging from obsessive love and sexual jealousy to sadism and pedophilia. These questions concerning love and jealousy, in Proust, often seem to be linked to the problem of time.[416]

Although I do not think attempts to freudianize whole episodes of the *Recherche* can lead to very fruitful literary criticism, I do think Bloom's attempt to clarify certain aspects of the *Recherche* by comparing them to Freudian theory are legitimate.[417] Bloom's attempt forms a link between Bowie's and Jones's shared hunch that Proust's narrator suffers from

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them love can still be recognized." (Proust, Marcel. *Time Regained* (transl. Stephen Hudson). 1931, public domain).

[416] Something that is also remarked by Harold Bloom. Cf. Bloom, *Marcel Proust*, p. 12: "Sexual jealousy in Proust is accompanied by a singular obsessiveness in regard to questions of space and time."

[417] Not to mention at all the critical potential for reading Nabokov's work through the prism of Freud. Nabokov's disdain for the "Viennese medicine man" has become a common-place in Nabokov criticism, and this seems to have withheld many critics from mentioning the two names in connection with another. Harold Bloom provides an early exception (see his introduction to *Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita, op. cit.*). More recently there has been Leland de la Durantaye's article: "Vladimir Nabokov and Sigmund Freud, or a Particular Problem." In: *American Imago,* vol. 62, no. 1, spring 2005, pp. 59-73.

somewhat of the same nympholeptic condition as Nabokov's Humbert. Yet, there must be a difference between the conditions of Proust's narrator and Humbert Humbert, for the fate of Proust's narrator is definitely not as tragic as that of Humbert Humbert; at least, not in the minds of most readers of the *Recherche*. Marcel does not kill anyone, nor does his craving for young girls lead him to succumb under its tyranny. Why? How can we account for the fact that Proust's *Recherche* eventually strikes us as a story of literary success, whereas Humbert's story is much more aptly defined as a story of human tragedy?

I have been using the word time a lot in this chapter – but, it might be asked: what does that word refer to? Time only gives what it takes. The concept of time is an idea without any representation in reality; we cannot capture it in any definite image. The dials on our clocks do not teach us what time is any more than an image of a musical instrument teaches us something about what it sounds like. When it comes to time, we are at a loss for a definition because we do not exactly seem to know in which sensory field we would have to look for it. Time can be seen on the façade of an old campanile, crumbling in the auburn heat of an empty desert, or heard, in the silence between the disconnected beats of its bell, faithfully dangling at noon. It can be tasted, too, in the staleness of a sip of expired milk in the morning, or sniffed up, upon opening a freshly printed book for the first time in the evening. Time eludes our tentative theories of it, and will not stop doing so, because it keeps transgressing the limits of the sensatory. This is what constitutes time's relentless tyranny, which consists in forcing us to take a stance toward it without being able to define it nearly as accurately as we would like. We have to come to grips with time, put our pasts in order to make sense of the present and plans for the future.

The best description of time in the *Recherche* that I have come across is that of Samuel Beckett, who describes it as "that double-headed monster of damnation and salvation."[418] As a more recent article by Roland Breeur emphasizes, this ambiguity also shows in Proust's narrator's descriptions of time, which are of a twofold nature: "elles opposent d'une part l'expérience accrue du ravage que produit le temps, et d'autre part

[418] Beckett, Samuel. *Proust* (1931). Reprinted as: "Time, Habit, Memory." In: Bloom, *Marcel Proust*, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

l'incapacité d'en éprouver l'écoulement, le passage ou la fuite."[419] It may be argued that this twofold concern with time, this double-headedness of time which pervades the narrator's descriptions of the reality surrounding him, also plays an essential role in the process of overcoming his obsessive love of Albertine in the sequence that follows her death.

Margaret Mein has remarked upon the important role virtuality plays in the *Recherche*. She compares Proust's narrator to Baudelaire's weary dreamer and quotes from *Petits Poèmes en prose XXIV*.[420] Both Baudelaire's dreamer and Proust's hero, she says, "experience suffering rather than shape and determine events."[421] Mein relates this sacred status of the virtual to the narrator's quest of self-realization, his "desire to escape from the self into a form closer to perfection."[422] Proust's narrator, like Baudelaire's dreamer, would be someone who strives to conserve a certain potentiality of his dreams and desires by never really turning them into actions, for the "I" the narrator strives to be, can only be "realized" by a Baudelairean "sortir de soi."[423]

I think Mein's focus on the role of virtuality in the *Recherche* can be very useful. I would however, by temporalizing it, like to temper the role she attributes to it. Proust's narrator, unlike Baudelaire's dreamer from *Les Projets*, is not only concerned with "a change of place," he also seeks what could be called a change of time. And this he *will* indeed realize at the end of the *Recherche*: his reinterpretation of the concept of time at the Guermantes' library has a liberating effect, and leads him to successfully accomplish at least one of his projects: to become a writer. And to become a writer does not at all amount to the abandonment of his former self, as Mein argues – on the contrary, I would say, the writer-self had always been there already, he just had to be "recovered."

The narrator's "sorti[e] de soi" by means of art remains of a temporary nature because his final aim is not to get away from himself, but to find himself anew and more truly. Art is not used to create a distance between the narrator's former self and a "new self," to replace the old self by a newer one – it is used to *accomplish* the sequence of selves

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[419] Breeur, Roland. "Les vertiges du temps." In: *Proust et la philosophie aujourd'hui* (eds. Mauro Carbone and Eleonara Sparvoli). Pisa: Edizione ETS, 2008, p. 258.
[420] "Pourquoi contraindre mon corps à changer de place, puisque mon âme voyage si lestement? Et à quoi bon exécuter des projets, puisque le projet est en lui-même une jouissance suffisante ?"
[421] Mein, Margaret. *Proust's Challenge of Time*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1962, p. 120.
[422] Mein, *Proust's Challenge of Time*, p. 124.
[423] *Ibid*.

that he has been up till now. This explains why even at the very end of the novel, the narrator is still concerned with questions of time, and still fretfully asks himself: "Était-il encore temps pour moi ? N'était-il pas trop tard ?"[424] Unlike Baudelaire's dreamer, Proust's narrator *does* care about the actual execution of his project; indeed, he feels the very success of his life depends upon a final realization of his identity through art.

At the very end, talking about the "petite sonnette" that used to indicate the departure of Charles Swann at Combray, the narrator tells us that "c'est en moi-même que j'étais obligé de redescendre"[425] to be able to hear its sound. The reason that it is so important for the narrator to be able to dig up from his memory the sound of the "petite sonnette" and to be able to listen to it again, is because this sound, reuniting the two different aspects of time (a reminder of its passing, and of its solidity, the past still being there), has come to incorporate the ambiguity of the notion of time itself.

Mein's focus on virtuality in the *Recherche* is legitimate, but in order to be critically viable should also be coupled with Beckett's and Breeur's insight that Marcel's concept of time is fraught with ambiguities. This ambiguity, slowly taking shape throughout the novel before ultimately being rendered explicit at its end, together with the questions concerning virtuality introduced above, are also present in the episode of *Albertine disparue,* to which I wish to turn right now.

Albertine, after having been more or less imprisoned by the narrator, has left him, has become a fugitive in his eyes. The narrator, struck by doubts and fears as a result from his ever-growing jealousy, decides to send out Saint-Loup to investigate into the nature of her departure, and if possible, to convince her to return to the narrator. In doubt about whether this was the right thing to do, yet somewhat relieved for finally having taken action, the narrator contentedly muses:

> Je ne me trompais pas du reste absolument ; le spécifique pour guérir un événement malheureux (les trois quarts des événements le sont) c'est une décision ; car elle a pour effet, par un brusque renversement de nos pensées, d'interrompre le flux de celles qui viennent de l'événement passé et

[424] Proust, *Le Temps retrouvé*, p. 1044.
[425] Proust, *Le Temps retrouvé*, p. 1046.

> dont elles prolongent la vibration, de le briser par un flux de pensées inverses, venu du dehors, de l'avenir.[426]

The narrator is content because he has taken a decision, because he has taken up arms against a reality that was oppressing him. And at first, it seems that that which rendered him satisfied, is to have been able, by his firm decision, to put a hold on time. Making a decision has allowed him to interrupt the flow of those thoughts in him that represent past events. He discovers he has been confined by certain "vibrations" of past events. The narrator is unchaining himself from the bonds of the past through a "brusque renversement" of his thoughts. The aim is to reverse the flux, to see if thought can be made to flow the other way. "Making a decision" is what allows such an opening up of thought to the future. For a moment, the narrator is able to liberate himself from his past. The openness of the future, time turning into a virtuality, seems to constitute a source of possibilities: all this points to a prospect of hope for the narrator.

And yet, his happiness, at this moment, will be short-lived. If hope be the "First-fruits of Happiness," even the First-fruits will eventually go sour, and hope, all too often, reveals itself as the promise of its opposite: " 'Tis Hope is the most Hopeless thing of all," as Abraham Cowley eloquently reminds us.[427] Indeed, Proust's narrator soon discovers that the "brusque renversement" of his thoughts provoked by the direction of his thoughts towards the future, does not solve anything at all. The rigidity of his knowledge of the past fueled his jealousy and made him doubt Albertine's trustworthiness, but he now discovers that as long as he is unsure of the *actual* outcome of his decision to send out Saint-Loup, the same doubts and uncertainties will keep coming back to haunt him:

> Ce qui au fond me rendait si heureux, c'était la certitude secrète que, la mission de Saint-Loup ne pouvant échouer, Albertine ne pouvait manquer de revenir. Je le compris ; car n'ayant pas reçu dès le premier jour de réponse de Saint-Loup, je recommençai à souffrir. Ma décision, ma remise à lui de

[426] Proust, Marcel. *La Fugitive.* In: *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Paris: Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), 1954, tome III, p. 444. English translation: "I was not, for that matter, entirely wrong; the specific remedy for an unfortunate event (and three events out of four are unfortunate) is a decision; for its effect is that, by a sudden reversal of our thoughts, it interrupts the flow of those that come from the past event and prolong its vibration, and breaks that flow with a contrary flow of contrary thoughts, come from without, from the future." (*The Sweet Cheat Gone*, transl. C. K. Scott Moncrieff, 1930, public domain.)
[427] Abraham Cowley, "Against and For Hope" (from *The Mistress*, 1656).

> mes pleins pouvoirs, n'étaient donc pas la cause de ma joie qui sans cela eût duré, mais le « la réussite est sûre » que j'avais pensé quand je disais : « Advienne que pourra. » Et la pensée, éveillée par son retard, qu'en effet autre chose que la réussite pouvait advenir, m'était si odieuse que j'avais perdu ma gaîté.[428]

His initial inkling (which stated that "to make a decision" would offer him some relative comfort and happiness) proves to be wrong: not the openness of the future, but the possibility of it being closed-off and bound by the imagination is what made him celebrate his decision to send out Saint-Loup. And so the narrator's doubts return as his jealous cravings are fanned anew. But what is interesting is that from this moment onwards, the narrator seems to have caught a first glimpse of what it is that will eventually set him free from his obsessive love for Albertine: a view directed towards the future – even if at this time, the narrator's image of the future is still restrained by his jealousy, by his desire to know, and led astray by the false promises of hope.[429]

What we will see from this moment onwards, is that it is exactly by "opening up" his image of the future that the narrator will succeed in setting himself free from his relationship with Albertine. This movement of *opening up to* the future, of *virtualizing* future time and rendering it *multidimensional*, as opposed to a conception of the future that takes it as a simple extension of our hopes or desires (such as it eventually persisted to appear in the passage quoted above), will be what saves Proust's narrator from the tyranny of his obsessions, and, arguably, what could have saved Humbert from his. As long as the future stays closed, the past will keep haunting the narrator. But opening up to the future means creating an opening for the past to get out. Think of the obsessed mind as a room where the years have stained the curtains and imbibed the air with an unpleasant odor –

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[428] Proust, *La Fugitive*, p. 445. English translation: "What really made me so happy was the secret certainty that Saint-Loup's mission could not fail, Albertine was bound to return, I realised this; for not having received, on the following day, any answer from Saint-Loup, I began to suffer afresh. My decision, my transference to him of full power of action, were not therefore the cause of my joy, which, in that case, would have persisted; but rather the 'Success is certain' which had been in my mind when I said: "Come what may." And the thought aroused by his delay, that, after all, his mission might not prove successful, was so hateful to me that I had lost my gaiety." (*The Sweet Cheat Gone*, transl. C. K. Scott Moncrieff, 1930, public domain.)

[429] Proust himself frequently compares the phenomenon of jealousy to the rationalist urge to gather knowledge, to know and to understand. I have made a more extensive attempt to make sense of this connection between knowledge and jealousy in an article entitled "L'Epistémologie de la jalousie: Proust et Descartes." In: *Marcel Proust en réseau : Relief,* vol. 7, no. 2, 2013, pp. 60-72).

the wisest thing to do may be to simply open up the windows and let some fresh air into the room.

But Proust's narrator, still deeply rooted in the process of mourning, fearing the fresh breeze might gather too much momentum and turn into a violent storm that is liable to blow away the gauzy curtains sheltering the mind altogether, isn't immediately ready to open this window. Virtualizing time takes time. Opening up to the future, he discovers, first of all means opening up the self to itself. And in order for this to work when one is under the heavy burden of desire, one has to be able to forget: ultimately, "l'oubli seul finit par amener l'extinction du désir."[430] Forgetting Albertine will not be about replacing her with a new object of love or lust. Forgetting never simply means "moving on," as the common discourse of relationship therapy has it. On the contrary, Proust's narrator proposes:

> […] si le bonheur ou du moins l'absence de souffrances, peut être trouvé, ce n'est pas la satisfaction, mais la réduction progressive, l'extinction finale du désir qu'il faut chercher. On cherche à voir ce qu'on aime, on devrait chercher à ne pas le voir […].[431]

The process of mourning concerning Albertine cannot be ended by replacing her with someone else, like Humbert tries to do with Lolita. Humbert tries to recapture his lost Annabel in Lolita, by trying to internalize the image of Lolita and turn it into that of Annabel. Proust's narrator, who was genuinely in love with Albertine, cannot do this. There is something in Albertine, which, he has discovered, he will never be able to possess, for:

> […] les êtres ont un développement en nous, mais un autre hors de nous (je l'avais bien senti dans ces soirs où je remarquais en Albertine un enrichissement de qualités qui ne tenait pas qu'à ma mémoire) et qui ne laissent pas d'avoir des réactions l'un sur l'autre. J'avais eu beau, en cherchant à connaître Albertine, puis à la posséder tout entière, n'obéir qu'au besoin de réduire par l'expérience à des éléments mesquinement semblables à ceux de notre moi, le mystère de tout être, de tout pays

[430] Proust, *La Fugitive*, p. 450.
[431] *Ibid.* English translation: "So that if happiness or at least freedom from suffering can be found it is not the satisfaction, but the gradual reduction, the eventual extinction of our desire that we must seek. We attempt to see the person whom we love, we ought to attempt not to see her, oblivion alone brings about an ultimate extinction of desire." (*The Sweet Cheat Gone*, transl. C. K. Scott Moncrieff, 1930, public domain.)

> que l'imagination nous a fait paraître différent, et de pousser chacune de nos joies profondes vers sa propre destruction : je ne l'avais pu sans influer à mon tour sur la vie d'Albertine.[432]

It does not matter how hard the narrator would have tried to shape the image of Albertine to something she is not by reducing it to an image informed by what he knows about his own desires: there is something, "le mystère de tout être," which will always resist to such an appropriation (note in passing that this "mystère de tout être" is not at all unlike Levinas's "mystery into which the self retreats" cited above). One person cannot be reduced to another person for the narrator because, as we have seen in his earlier musings about love as fundamentally aberrative, individuality to him is something that is both a flux and a flight. As a flux, it is constantly changing and evolving; as a flight, it is ultimately unattainable by the other, and as such, becomes impregnable. Borrowing the voice of the dialectician, we might say: from the point of view of the self, the self is tainted by relativity; from the point of view of the other, it is of the order of the absolute. This irreducibility, for Proust's Marcel, also follows from a more general discovery he has made earlier, concerning the nature of events in the (i.e., his) world:

> […] jamais rien ne se répète exactement et les existences les plus analogues et que, grâce à la parenté des caractères et à la similitude des circonstances, on peut choisir pour les représenter comme symétriques l'une à l'autre, restent en bien des points opposées.[433]

One event, however similar to a previous event, can never be reduced to it: it has an absoluteness that cannot be taken from it in any comparison. Consequently, one person can never be reduced to another, for the other harbors "a mystery" that cannot be recuperated

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[432] Proust, *La Fugitive*, p. 499. English translation: "People develop in one way inside us, but in another way outside us (I had indeed felt this on those evenings when I remarked in Albertine an enrichment of qualities which was due not only to my memory), and these two ways do not fail to react upon each other. Albeit I had, in seeking to know Albertine, then to possess her altogether, obeyed merely the need to reduce by experiment to elements meanly similar to those of our own self the mystery of every other person, I had been unable to do so without exercising an influence in my turn over Albertine's life." (*The Sweet Cheat Gone*, transl. C. K. Scott Moncrieff, 1930, public domain.)

[433] *Ibid*. English translation: "For nothing is ever repeated exactly, and the most analogous lives which, thanks to the kinship of the persons and the similarity of the circumstances, we may select in order to represent them as symmetrical, remain in many respects opposite." (*The Sweet Cheat Gone*, transl. C. K. Scott Moncrieff, 1930, public domain.)

by the imagination of the self. As we have seen, it is precisely the fragile aura of this mystery that Humbert keeps trampling upon. One of the most important tensions in *Lolita* is this: on the one hand there is Lolita's mystery that desperately tries to speak out; a delicate voice that decrees its oppressor to tread softly. On the other hand, there is Humbert's irreverence that tramples and stifles this voice, sternly opposing it is going wherever it is it wants to go. The tension is charged with additional moral complexity by the fact that Humbert does not utter such irreverence, as one might be led to expect, in the form of a violent shout. Not at all – he delivers it with perfect poise in a passionate whisper.[434]

To return to Proust. It is important to stress that the source of the narrator's knowledge is an insight provided to him by the passage of time. It are, he says, "ces soirs où je remarquais en Albertine un enrichissement de qualités qui ne tenait pas qu'à ma mémoire"[435] that provide the basis for his insight that there is something about Albertine, or so to speak, "part of her," that will always transgress and never be bound by the volitional capacities of consciousness and memory. The reason the narrator fully recognizes this elusive multidimensionality of Albertine's person is because he glimpses at the same moment a truth about time, memory, and forgetting. Time functions here as an alienating agency: it alienates the viewer from the object of his view, and thus provides him with the opportunity of readjusting his image to reality. When the narrator finally becomes fully aware of this discovery, it allows him to begin forgetting Albertine:

> Comme il y a une géométrie dans l'espace, il y a une psychologie dans le temps, où les calculs d'une psychologie plane ne seraient plus exacts parce qu'on n'y tiendrait pas compte du temps et d'une des formes qu'il revêt, l'oubli ; l'oubli dont je commençais à sentir la force et qui est un si puissant instrument d'adaptation à la réalité parce qu'il détruit peu à peu en nous le passé survivant qui est en constante contradiction avec elle. Et j'aurais vraiment bien pu deviner plus tôt qu'un jour je n'aimerais plus Albertine.[436]

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[434] Again, it seems unfair, as Patnoe and her followers do, to compare *Lolita* to all sorts of violent accounts of child rape and abuse – Humbert's account offers a different sort of discourse, and to put this discourse on a par with the trite (though obviously horrible) accounts we are confronted with in newspapers and other daily sources, fails to do justice to the complexity of the *particular* account *Lolita* offers.

[435] Proust, *La Fugitive*, p. 499.

[436] Proust, *La Fugitive*, p. 557. English translation: "As there is a geometry in space, so there is a psychology in time, in which the calculations of a plane psychology would no longer be accurate because we should not be

So from this moment onwards, the narrator starts to forget Albertine. The process of forgetting a lost loved one can only be successfully completed once the narrator has discovered his truth about the influence of the passage of time on the way we perceive those around us. At the core of this operation is forgetfulness. To forget does not mean to forget about someone in particular, it means destroying those elements of the past that prevent us from becoming who or what we would like to be: becoming who we are, in this sense, means forgetting who we were, at least partially.

Releasing ourselves from the past is not just about forgetting *it*, but it is also about forgetting ourselves. This is intimated in an earlier reflection where the narrator says that:

> Puisque l'homme peut agir sur le monde extérieur, comment, en faisant jouer la ruse, l'intelligence, l'intérêt, l'affection, n'arriverais-je pas à supprimer cette chose atroce : l'absence d'Albertine. On croit que selon son désir on changera autour de soi les choses, on le croit parce que, hors de là, on ne voit aucune solution favorable. On ne pense pas à celle qui se produit le plus souvent et qui est favorable aussi : nous n'arrivons pas à changer les choses selon notre désir, mais peu à peu notre désir change.[437]

Recovering from the sense of loss provoked by Albertine's departure and subsequent death implies not only a process of forgetting Albertine, but also a process of forgetting parts of himself, of reinventing himself. It is about getting rid of those desires that keep reconnecting him to Albertine – and finally, it is about undoing himself from the forces of habit that have seeped into his existence and left vestiges of desires that are now structurally unsatisfiable. The narrator's solution is to abolish the chain of his old selves,

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taking into account time and one of the forms that it assumes, oblivion; oblivion, the force of which I was beginning to feel and which is so powerful an instrument of adaptation to reality because it gradually destroys in us the surviving past which is a perpetual contradiction of it. And I ought really to have discovered sooner that one day I should no longer be in love with Albertine." (*The Sweet Cheat Gone*, transl. C. K. Scott Moncrieff, 1930, public domain.)

[437] Proust, *La Fugitive*, p. 451. English translation: "Since man is able to influence the outer world, how, if I brought into play cunning, intelligence, pecuniary advantage, affection, should I fail to succeed in destroying this appalling fact: Albertine's absence. We believe that according to our desire we are able to change the things around about us, we believe this because otherwise we can see no favorable solution. We forget the solution that generally comes to pass and is also favorable: we do not succeed in changing things according to our desire, but gradually our desire changes." (*The Sweet Cheat Gone*, transl. C. K. Scott Moncrieff, 1930, public domain.)

and replace it by a different congregation of selves, so he may open himself up to happiness anew.

In Levinas's *Totalité et infini*, we read something that is in line with this, and illustrates the point more abstractly, but more precisely:

> Sans multiplicité et sans discontinuité – sans fécondité – le Moi demeurerait un sujet où toute aventure retournerait en aventure d'un destin. Un être capable d'un autre destin que le sien est un être fécond. […] Le permanence du moi dans l'être le plus léger, le moins sédentaire, le plus gracieux, le plus élancé vers l'avenir produit l'irréparable et, par conséquent, limite.[438]

The self has to recognize a sort of multiplicity within itself to be able to untie itself from those elements inside of it that operate as a form of closure on its possibilities. For Proust's narrator this reshaping of identity though, is, as we have seen, closely related to his concept of time. This becomes all the more clear when, proceeding ever further towards the end of his process of mourning his loss, he states that:

> Ce n'est pas parce que les autres sont morts que notre affection pour eux s'affaiblit, c'est parce que nous mourons nous-mêmes. […] On ne peut être fidèle qu'à ce dont on se souvient, on ne se souvient que de ce qu'on a connu. Mon moi nouveau, tandis qu'il grandissait à l'ombre de l'ancien, l'avait souvent entendu parler d'Albertine ; à travers lui, à travers les récits qu'il en recueillait, il croyait la connaître, elle lui était sympathique, il l'aimait, mais ce n'était qu'une tendresse de seconde main.[439]

The point is not that the passing (on) of time effaces the past, or the recollection of a lost loved one. The point the narrator is trying to make here is that processing one's loss is

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[438] Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totalité et infini: essai sur l'extériorité*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961, pp. 258-259. English translation: "Without mulitplicity and discontinuity – without fecundity – the I would remain a subject in which every adventure would revert into the adventure of a fate. A being capable of another fate than its own is a fecund being. […] The very permanence of the I in the lightest, the least sedentary, the most graceful being, the being most launched towards the future, produces the irreparable, and consequently limits." Source: Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity* (transl. Alphonso Lingis). The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979, p. 282.

[439] Proust, *La Fugitive*, p. 595. English translation: "It is not because other people are dead that our affection for them grows faint, it is because we ourselves are dying. […] We may be faithful to what we remember, we remember only what we have known. My new self, while it grew up in the shadow of the old, had often heard the other speak of Albertine; through that other self, through the information that it gathered from it, it thought that it knew her, it found her attractive, it was in love with her, but this was merely an affection at second hand." (*The Sweet Cheat Gone*, transl. C. K. Scott Moncrieff, 1930, public domain.)

more about reshaping oneself than about reshaping the past. Proust's narrator knows that there is an element of vehemence in *time itself* that causes it to be beyond our control. But the thought is: if you reshape yourself, the past will follow. The new self has not been severed off from the past self who mourned the loss of Albertine, rather, it has been superimposed on this mourning self. Forgetting the past does not simply mean "forgetting what happened," for time is not of such a nature as to allow this. The past will keep coming back, even if you might not want it to. Forgetting the past means to cope with it, to cope with it by reshaping yourself in such a way as to create a distance between the mourning self and the present self. Once the narrator has found that time adds a new dimension to our psychological universe, his challenge will be to position his new self in this universe, and to find out how he can use it to design his new identity to cope with the demands of his desire to forget about Albertine.

But does the narrator really succeed in doing this? Are we forced to believe the conclusions he presents here? Maybe not. For is it not possible to infer that, in a way, he is exactly like Humbert, for example when after all these reflections, and all the way at the end of his process of mourning, he has come to the conclusion that: "mon amour pour Albertine n'avait été qu'une forme passagère de ma dévotion à la jeunesse"?[440] Are we not obliged to conclude from this remark, and from a revelation that follows somewhat afterwards when the narrator says he feels uncomfortable with leaving Paris for Tansonville because in Paris he has "une jeune fille qui couchait dans le pied à terre que j'avais loué,"[441] and the following general reflection that "Un amour a beau s'oublier, il peut déterminer la forme de l'amour qui le suivra […]. Et ainsi ma demeure avait exigé, en souvenir d'Albertine oubliée, la présence de ma maîtresse actuelle, que je cachais aux visiteurs et qui remplissait ma vie comme jadis Albertine,"[442] are we not obliged to conclude from all this, that the narrator finally ends up in the same position as Humbert? And yet Humbert dies in prison, a broken man, whereas Proust's narrator "gets away" with his perverse behavior and will not be stopped by it as he is heading for his big literary achievement. How to explain this?

[440] Proust, *La Fugitive*, p. 644.
[441] Proust, *La Fugitive*, p. 677.
[442] *Ibid*.

The relationship between Marcel and Albertine remains, as we have seen at the end of the previous subsection, fraught with ambiguities. But I hope my analysis of parts of one of the most important processes of mourning in the *Recherche* can provide, if not a definite answer, at least the hint of an answer. For despite the similarities, it shows that there is an essential difference between Proust's narrator and Nabokov's Humbert. Taking at heart Proust's assertion that "jamais rien ne se répète exactement" I have tried to find in my analysis a distinguishing characteristic in Proust's narrator that accounts for this. This distinguishing characteristic, I think, shows when we focus on the narrator's concern for virtuality or potentiality – not as a means to a baudelairean "escape from the self," but in his recognition that they are essential qualities of time, and especially of the future. Time is ambiguous in the *Recherche*, and it will keep presenting itself as the double-headed monster Beckett takes it to be all the way through to the end. Yet, what saves the narrator from succumbing to the siren song of the past, is his recognition that even if "les vrais paradis sont les paradis qu'on a perdus,"[443] they cannot be regained as such in reality. Yet, luckily for the narrator, the realms of paradise do not reach beyond the confines of art, which is what keeps the possibility of their resurrection alive. On the downside: it is *only* by translating his past into a work of art that the past can be resurrected – reality itself can offer but shadows here.

Proust's narrator, whilst indulging in his supposed perverse activities with different little girls, never gets enraptured by one of them like Humbert. My hunch is that this is because, contrary to Humbert, he proceeds to a much more careful analysis of the process of his mourning and the effect the loss of his love has upon him. He discovers a way out of this process by using time, as it were, against itself: after having found out that the laws of human psychology and morality cannot be thought in a vacuum, cannot be thought of as separated from time, he exploits time as a means to reshape himself, to recreate new possibilities and thus a new future.

This does not make him morally superior to Humbert. In fact, it might make him worse. Using his insights into the nature of time to replace the notion of his love for Albertine by a new one, i.e., his love for the quality of "being young" in general, he readily

[443] Proust, *Le Temps retrouvé*, p. 870.

employs it to justify his relationship with a young girl he keeps at his Parisian pied-à-terre.[444] But why do so many critics – indeed, maybe all of Proust's readers – tend to forgive his narrator this perversity and cover it beneath the story of his artistic success?

I think this is because the narrator so aptly manages to present the principles he discovers about his "psychologie dans le temps" as a basis for salvation. First they help him to get over his process of mourning Albertine. And then he even has the force to use these insights into the nature of time as the basis for a brilliant work of art. That he also uses it to condone his behavior towards little girls, tends to slip our minds in our final judgment, because the narrator offers such a convincing theoretical framework to deal with the problematic. The most difficult of moral questions here, of course, is: why does he not manage to benefit from this framework himself? Why does he fail to apply it? Whence the episode with the little girl? Is there not something incongruous about this episode? Is this a reminder of the fact discussed earlier, that there may be an unbridgeable abyss between moral precepts and moral practice? Or should we say: at least Proust's narrator has not completely *lost* himself to his vice, did not carry it through to its tragic end like Humbert? These are difficult questions to answer. One of the things we can assume it to teach us though, is that any theoretical framework we may come up with, however convincing it may be, will always in the first and last place, present itself as a challenge.

Similarly, morality itself often presents itself as a challenge. Moral laws are not prescriptions; they voice challenges. To believe that they have actual prescriptive force is similar to believing that the laws of physics prescribe and determine the course of nature. In reality, nature determines the course of nature, the laws of physics provide just more or less accurate descriptions of the results of this fundamental determination. Likewise, it is moral acts and events that determine the course of morality – moral laws are just tentative

[444] Proust, *La Fugitive*, p. 677: "[…] j'avais à Paris une jeune fille qui couchait dans le pied-à-terre que j'avais loué. Comme d'autres de l'arôme des forêts ou du murmure d'un lac, j'avais besoin de sommeil à côté de moi, et, le jour, de l'avoir toujours à côté de moi, dans ma voiture. Car un amour a beau s'oublier, il peut déterminer la forme de l'amour qui le suivra." This citation should cast some doubts upon Jones's assertion that Marcel's interest for young girls "remains technically chaste." Also, the elements of little trips made in a car with a young girl the narrator wants to have in his presence because she reminds him of the form of his former love-relationship with Albertine seem not unlike the roadtrips Humbert undertakes with Lolita. The whole fragment seems at least suggestive of the kind of relationship that Humbert entertains with Lolita. Although it remains quite a stretch from this condensed Proustian fragment to the elaborate novel that is *Lolita*, a faint echo is undeniably audible.

descriptions of what we would like this course to look like, complemented by proposals and solutions for problems we may come across. There is no essential relation between the person who thinks up such solutions and the practical life of a person. When it comes to morality, one might be a champion problem solver, and a terrible person – similarly, an astronomer might have very interesting things to say about the physical laws on Mars, but he would not be able to live there (at least not yet). Proust's narrator offers some excellent guidelines for dealing with the phenomenon of human loss, but does not always himself act according to these guidelines.

An essential part of Humbert's problem is that he never sees the potentiality of time, never sees the openness of the future, does not perceive the possibility of its redescription in terms of virtuality. Memory, to him, is a siren's song that will lead him, first to his moral, and eventually to his literal demise. Proust's narrator finds a way around this imminent decline by installing in time an element of virtuality, by opening up the dimension of time with fruitful new redescriptions, so as to make place for an artistic present that is fed by the past without being contained in it because it manages to stay open to the future.

Levinas, in *Totalité et infini*, states that:

> La distance à l'égard de l'être par la fécondité, ne se ménage pas seulement dans le réel ; elle consiste en une distance à l'égard du présent même qui choisit ses possibles, mais qui s'est réalisé et a vieilli d'une certaine façon et qui, par conséquent, figé en réalité définitive, a déjà sacrifié des possibles. Les souvenirs, à la recherche du temps perdu, procurent des rêves, mais ne rendent pas les occasions perdues. La vraie temporalité, celle où le définitif n'est pas définitif, suppose donc la possibilité, non pas de ressaisir tout ce qu'on aurait pu être, mais de ne plus regretter les occasions perdues devant l'infini illimité de l'avenir. Il ne s'agit pas de se complaire dans un je ne sais quel romantisme des possibles, mais d'échapper à l'écrasante responsabilité de l'existence qui vire en destin, de se reprendre à l'aventure de l'existence pour être à l'infini. Le Moi est à la fois cet engagement et ce dégagement – et dans ce sens temps, drame en plusieurs actes.[445]

[445] Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, *op. cit.*, p. 258. English translation: "In fecundity distance with regard to being is not only provided in the real; it consists in a distance with regard to the present itself, which chooses its possibles, but is realized and has aged somewhat, and consequently, congealed into definitive reality, has already sacrificed possibles. Memories, seeking after lost time, procure dreams, but do not restore lost occasions. Thus true temporality, that in which the definitive is not definitive, presupposes the possibility not of grasping again all that one might have been, but of no longer regretting the lost occasions before the unlimited infinity of the future. It is not a question of complacency in some romanticism of the possible, but of escaping the crushing responsibility of existence that veers into fate, of resuming the adventure of existence

Proust's narrator takes this lesson seriously. To go in search of lost time blindly is a fruitless undertaking, for going about it that way will never result in our bringing back from the depths of time what we lost to it. The only way we can get back something of the past is by waiting for it to come to us, in the form of an involuntary memory, and to provide an authentic description of this experience by means of art. The self is at the same time an "engagement" and a "disengagement." It cannot be shed and we should not lose ourselves in a "je ne sais quel romantisme des possibles". Rather, we should be aiming to keep the self open to the future and to new possibilities. For this *ouverture* seems essential to the development and completion of the combined project of becoming who we are by: (1) forgetting those parts of who we were that may be harmful to our development; (2) recapturing those parts of our past selves that we perceive of as beneficial, and; (3) recreating our eventual self through a redescription of these parts (a redescription that is aimed not at the past, but uses it as a means to open up the future to become what we want to be).[446] Humbert never successfully manages to do these things, because his vision of time is almost completely one-dimensional. He is, as common parlance has it, stuck in the past. Humbert, unlike Marcel, cannot incorporate in his image of Lolita an authentic account of her suffering, fails to see that the past cannot simply be recaptured through violent appropriation.

Thus, *Lolita* turns out to be a tragic tale: it shows us what happens when we do not take care to thoroughly investigate the nature of our desires. It shows us the image of a person that does not halt for a moment to think about the possible redefinition of his self (selves) and the defining forces at work in it (them). To take recourse again to the vocabulary of Levinas: they can only conceive of their selves as destinies, and never of their selves as adventures. Proust, who provides an even subtler outlook on the matter, reminds us that whether or not we conceive of ourselves as destinies (and to a certain extent we always do), this does not mean that the self is not at the same time a challenge and an adventure.

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so as to be infinite. The I is at the same time this engagement and this disengagement – and in this sense time, drama in several acts." Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, *op. cit.*, pp. 281-282.

[446] E.g. In the case of Proust's narrator, this means becoming an artist.

6.6. The Irony of Identity

This is not the first time I have evoked Proust in this thesis. Mention has been made of him already in the chapter on *Pnin* and the philosophy of (neo-)pragmatism. There, I made use of a scene from the *Recherche* to point to a phenomenon I described, with a bow to contemporary philosopher William Desmond,[447] the idiocy of suffering.

Related to this idiocy of suffering, there is what might be termed the irony of identity. For, as I've tried to show through my reading of Proust, there is something deeply ironic about our concept of identity. The irony of identity is that, especially when we are suffering, to prolong its "id," we may be forced to undo ourselves from it (this id) by the demands of happiness. In the phenomenon of suffering, sameness begs for a change; identity wants to make a difference and forces the self to seek for otherness. This otherness constitutes a challenge, one of the most profound ethical challenges for a human being: for this otherness has to be found beyond the self, but at the same time must be made to communicate with what is most intimate to the self: itself.

Now it seems impossible for the self to find itself dwelling on the plains of otherness and simultaneously remain engaged in intimate introspection – consciousness is, or at least strives to be, unidirectional. This is why, in cases where we have to deal with such moral quandaries as the unsatisfiable desire that imposes its demands on us after the loss of a loved one, the self screams out for rupture with itself. But: the original source of suffering did not ask for something as violent as a rupture. It wanted the opposite: it wanted for the self to be restored to order. This then, is the irony: to be restored to order, a rupture is demanded. To attain peace, war must be declared. But as many people know, it is only in the rhetoric of warlords that peace is considered the result of war. So the question is this: is there, to the suffering self, a non-violent way to bring about the rupture it craves for? No: not by any determinate or decisive process. Yes: if we may cause the self to come to an awareness of the irony that constitutes it. Awareness of the irony of identity may bring about an awareness of the temporal nature of the self, of identity being essentially a time-

[447] Desmond is (of course) not responsible for the sense in which I'm using the word "idiocy" – the bow goes to indicate that it was his analysis of what he calls "idiot wisdom" that opened me up to certain potencies springing from the Greek etymology of the word. Cf. especially his remarks on "idiot wisdom" throughout his *Perplexity and Ultimacy*, *op. cit.*, and in *Ethics and The Between*, *op. cit.*, pp. 170ff.

regulated concept, depending upon the relativity of the future and the absoluteness of the past. To come to terms with the terms of this irony is what guides many decisions that fall within the scope of practical morality. The process of this coming to terms is what can be named "attunement."

According to Nabokov's fictitious editor John Ray Jr., the full title Humbert Humbert gave to his manuscript was *Lolita, or The Confession of a White Widowed Male*. And indeed, some of the passages in *Lolita* distinctly inscribe themselves in the genre of confessional literature. The description of the story as a "confession" intimates that Humbert does not just aim to narrate, but also seeks to atone. Above we have looked in more detail at the most controversial example of atonement, when we discussed Humbert's invocation of the concept of love. We recall Humbert claimed: "I was a pentapod monster, but I loved you." I've already focused on the question concerning Humbert's right to invoke the concept of love, and doubted that he had it. For the sake of the argument though,[448] we may suppose he was right after all. Let us assume, also for the sake of the argument, that the Levinassian definition of love is as far from giving an adequate description of the phenomenon as was Humbert's tangled conception of it. In that case, another interesting moral question would present itself to us, *à savoir* (id est): should the fact that Humbert atones for his behavior by evocation of his love for Lolita lead us to drop any feelings of moral asperity we might harbor against him?

I think we would still have to answer in the negative. Why? In short: because morality asks for attunement, not for atonement. But let us not get ahead of ourselves, and explore the question.

It has been argued that Humbert's atonement makes him less morally reprehensible. Nabokov himself has famously remarked, while comparing Humbert Humbert to one of his sly villains, Hermann Hermann, that "Both are neurotic scoundrels, yet there is a green lane in Paradise where Humbert is permitted to wander at dusk once a

[448] To be sure, Nabokov's *own* definition of "love" seems to be much more in line with a Levinassian vocabulary here. Cf. his lecture on Tolstoy in *Lectures on Russian Literature*, where he describes the novel *Anna Karenin(a)* as "a tangle of ethical tentacles" – the moral disentangled from this tangle is: "Love cannot be exclusively carnal because then it is egotistic, and being egotistic it destroys instead of creating." (Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lectures on Russian Literature* (ed. Bowers). New York: Harcourt, 1981 (Harvest paperback edition), p. 145.) Of course, I'm not suggesting Humbert's attitude is "exclusively carnal"; I'm only pointing to Nabokov defining "love" in terms of a strictly non-egotistical, non-destructive phenomenon.

year; but Hell shall never parole Hermann."[449] Julian W. Connolly is one of the critics who seems to interpret this statement as implying an attenuation of the moral verdict of Humbert's acts, explicitly relating it to the fact that Humbert shows remorse, whereas Hermann doesn't.[450]

Against this line of argument though, it can be argued that to attribute actual moral value to the concept of atonement is a confusion of terms. Remorse and atonement are feelings with religious value, but they appear rather out of place when it comes to moral judgment. That is not to say that these concepts are of no value in general – to the contrary: there are contexts where expressing atonement is of great practical use. When it comes to the question of *moral* value however, I do not think they have much to offer.

Consider the case of one of the most famous "confessors" in Western history: the case of Saint Augustine. Like Humbert, he figured himself to belong to that class of men who "went on seduced and seducing, deceived and deceiving."[451] St. Augustine's concern is to attain what he calls a "happy rest,"[452] a state he hopes to reach through atonement. How does one atone? By confessing one's sins. To whom does one confess? To God, who has the power to forgive. The point I want to make here, is that the phenomenon of atonement only makes sense when one has a god (or something equivalent to a god) to address oneself to. Only if one believes the ultimate moral value of our lives is decided by an ultimate Decider of Values who has the power to restore the darkness of our sins to the light of the happy rest, to speak St. Augustine's language, can one expect atonement to appertain to the domain of morality. To atone for one's sins without God would be moral whistling in the dark. Humbert claims he is offering a confession; it is said that Humbert is remorseful and wishes to atone; but then one must ask: to whom is he confessing? If the answer (as it seems to be) is: to his readers, then we, his readers, find ourselves in an embarrassing position: for certainly, no gods are we.

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[449] *Despair*, p. xiii.
[450] Connolly, Julian W. "Nabokov's (re)visions of Dostoevsky." In: Connolly, Julian W. (ed.). *Nabokov and his Fiction: New Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 153.
[451] (Saint) Augustine. *Confessions*. In: *Basic Writings of St. Augustine* (edited with an introduction and notes by Whitney J. Oates). New York: Random House, 1948, p. 41. I'm not in any way suggesting a direct relation between the sort of acts St. Augustine sought to repent for, and the sort of crimes committed by Humbert. Notwithstanding, the expression, if read with an open mind, seems to express Humbert's condition in a wonderfully adequate way.
[452] St. Augustine, *Confessions*, p. 232.

Of course this is not to say that we cannot decide about questions of moral value. Rather, it is to say that, although we may offer moral advice to Humbert, although we may make our moral estimations and present our judgments, we can never, like Augustine's God, hope to offer him such a thing as "happy rest." We can reply and react to his confession as fellow human beings, but we cannot *hear* it with the ears of a god, nor have we the power to *settle* his accounts with the vigor of a godhead. To exact forgiveness from anyone else than a god, is evidently a legitimate gesture, but to claim that this gesture has a value that reaches beyond sociological value, to claim that it can have moral value, that it makes a difference for the moral judgment of an act, I repeat, is to confuse religious terms with moral terms. Such an intermingling of terms made sense in the time of Saint Augustine, but fails to live up to the demands of morality in the more secular age we call our own.

So – what sort of "demands" do I have in mind for morality? How may we appeal morally to someone like Humbert? What may morality expect from Humbert? And what may it hope? If we cannot make much of his atonement, could he have benefited from the sort of attunement Proust's vocabulary adumbrates? If "happy rest" is unattainable, would a happy unrest be of any practical value? When the self finds itself beyond hope for a restoration to order, can it still bring about an attunement to disorder? Better yet: could it teach itself to accept itself *as* disorder? Does it have the *patience* required for this disorder? Or must this disorder always be dressed up again as order before we can come to terms with it? Should the irony of identity ultimately make us smile or wince?

The irony of identity is that it can only be continued through discontinuation. To atone for our mistakes amounts to the will to continue what cannot be continued, to attempt to harmoniously smooth out the disruptions in our moral consciousness by casting on their darkness the gentle light of remorse. But this is to be forgetful of the particular ugliness of these dark disruptions – gentle and warm though this light may be, cast it on what lurks beneath the surface of this remorse and the only result will be that that which was hidden away in the dark, is brought to shiver in the glaring headlight of consciousness again. To come to terms with moral wrongdoing, we have to move beyond atonement, beyond this bringing into the light again of our past mistakes. Morality asks more: it asks that we reposition ourselves towards our mistakes. It is in the clair-obscur realm of this

repositioning where our morality is ultimately tested, for it is here that we put our identity at stake. "Clair-obscur," for this re-positioning forbids us to simply turn away from what we were. But neither does it mean we can continue to be what we were by smoothing out a few less likeable elements about ourselves. One has to be *fully* invested in this repositioning for it to be meaningful at all.

The ground for the potentiality of this meaningfulness (its condition of possibility, in Kantian terms) is precisely the irony of identity: the circuitous relation between continuity and discontinuity that makes me what I am (that makes the self what it is). Atonement tends to think of this relation as a straight line that once discontinued, may be continued. Attunement asks that we show a genuine awareness of the complexity of this relation, and start conceiving of it as convolute. A big part of the complexity of this convolution is determined, as I have tried to show over the course of the last two chapters, by our existence as beings determined in and by time. Consequently, a big part of the moral challenge of being what and who we are, consists in successfully relating to who we were and what we are to become. Only through a successful attunement to this moral challenge can we hope to make sense of the interplay between continuity and discontinuity, and decide, whether in our case, the irony of identity constitutes our greatest sorrow, or our biggest joy.

Chapter 7: The Rise and Fall of King Kinbote: *Pale Fire*, Nietzsche, and the Reach of Our Resolutions

7.1. *Pale Fire:* Creations and Confrontations

Pale Fire is an extraordinarily daring novel. At least, it would be, had it been written by anyone else than Vladimir Nabokov. In his case, it is the artistic epitome, the combinational crown of his literary production. Reuniting all the elements of his art, it presents us with a sort of summary of everything his creative wit was capable of doing in one single text. One single text? Well, two, actually, for *Pale Fire* consists of a poetic text, a poem in four cantos entitled *Pale Fire* written by a poet named John Shade, and a critical text subdivided in three different sections: a *Foreword*, a *Commentary*, and an *Index*, by Charles Kinbote, who is also responsible for the editorial delivery of the whole (poem and critical apparatus).

This seems straightforward enough – but already during the foreword our expectations are if not startled, at least nudged and tugged at a fair bit. That is to say, the editor of the poem, who has presented himself to us as a scholar, seems somewhat idiosyncratic, or at least, not subscribing to those codes of scholarship *we* have been brought up with. But then again, the foreword is dated 1959, we are right on the eve of the Swinging Sixties, and well, maybe scholars did things differently back then.

As we pass on to the poem, though, we enter into an altogether more traditional rhythm: 999 smooth-flowing lines, iambically pentametered, heroically coupled. Here and there, we may feel, the poet has sacrificed the demands of sense to the seduction of sound; sometimes, too, both verse and autobiographical verve get rather light-footed – but on the whole, our experience of reading this has been satisfactory – for such a long poem, we may say, this wasn't bad at all. John Shade seems sympathetic enough, and we feel privileged he has shared with us not only trifles from his daily experience, but also valuable views on art, death, life, and even an insight into the tragic history of the suicide of his daughter, Hazel Shade.

Then we arrive at the commentary – back to that remarkable scholar, Charles Kinbote. The first paragraph looks promising: the commentator offers a not unconvincing explanation of the first lines of the poem, and reminds us in passing that he has been a

neighbor of John Shade during the last year of his life – well, sounds good, we think: here is a man who might be able to teach us a lot more about the man behind the amiable protagonist of the autobiographical poem we have just read. Since, as we have learned from the foreword, John Shade himself was tragically murdered right after finishing his poem, this man, who appears to have been very close to him, might prove to be a very valuable source of information.

But soon that same force that was pulling and tugging at the confines of our expectations, silently nudging at the boundaries of our comprehension, starts to seep into our readerly conscience again: this Kinbote, it seems, is telling us that underneath the ostensibly straightforward surface of the poem we have just read, a far more intricate story is to be found. What may have looked like a poem inspired by occurrences and events from John Shade's past and present life, has *actually* been inspired by an altogether different story: that of the life of an exiled king called Charles the Beloved who used to reign over a faraway northern kingdom named Zembla. Kinbote, being himself a native of this country, happily informs us of the history of this kingdom, of its perilous revolution, of the sensational escape of its king and the latter's fairy-tale like adventures (including many fantastical homoerotic ones with all sorts of "boys"). Eventually, at the end of the commentary, Kinbote will reveal us a secret that at that point we may have already come to suspect: Charles Kinbote and the exiled king are one and the same person. What Kinbote has been recounting are the vicissitudes of his own escape, and the story of his attempts to get Shade to transform *this* story into the poem we have read: *Pale Fire*.

Depending on our attentiveness, concentration, earlier experiences with Nabokov's works, and probably many other factors we will soon, eventually, or at some point, discover that Charles Kinbote is not the most reliable of editors. Many examples of this unreliability can, and have been pointed out by commentaries to Kinbote's commentary. The most obvious example of this unreliability is found almost right at the beginning, in Kinbote's second note, to the line that ends the first stanza of Shade's poem. No commentary on *Pale Fire* could hope to skip the brisk cerulean beauty of these opening lines, so let me cite them here:

> I was the shadow of the waxwing slain

By the false azure in the windowpane;
I was the smudge of ashen fluff – and I
Lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky.
And from the inside, too, I'd duplicate
Myself, my lamp, an apple on a plate:
Uncurtaining the night, I'd let dark glass
Hang all the furniture above the grass,
And how delightful when a fall of snow
Covered my glimpse of lawn and reached up so
As to make chair and bed exactly stand
Upon that snow, out in that crystal land![453]

Kinbote's suggestion, in his note to the last line of this stanza, is that "in the disjointed half-obliterated draft," two additional lines can be made out, reading:

Ah, I must not forget to say something
That my friend told me of a certain king.[454]

Now if the commentator's first note to this stanza was already a little strange (but not without a certain charm, so we let it pass), this one will seem even more incredulous, especially to readers who still have in mind the form of the lines just cited – the variant Kinbote claims to have found here, "in the vaults of the variants,"[455] is glaringly deviant from the iambic pentameters of the poem. Vigilant readers will already have their suspicion awakened (what exactly is going on here, what game is this strange commentator playing at?). To these wary readers, the confession that is to be encountered further on in the commentary (in the note to line 550), might not come as a surprise – to many first-time readers however, it will:

[453] *Pale Fire*, p. 457.
[454] *Pale Fire*, p. 487.
[455] Quoted from a later formulation by Kinbote where he tells us "he has given the royal fugitive a refuge in the vaults of the variants he has preserved." *Pale Fire*, p. 492.

> I wish to say something about an earlier note (to line 12). Conscience and scholarship have debated the question, and I now think that the two lines given in that note are distorted and tainted by wistful thinking. It is the *only* time in the course of the writing of these difficult comments, that I have tarried, in my distress and disappointment, on the brink of falsification. I must ask the reader to ignore those two lines (which, I am afraid, do not even scan properly). I could strike them out before publication but that would mean reworking the entire note, or at least a considerable part of it, and I have no time for such stupidities.[456]

Kinbote does not specify the consequences of this confession, and simply makes haste to go on with the rest of his commentary – he has "no time for such stupidities." Readers, who are linear leafers by nature, might feel the same, and say: "that was a strange confession indeed, but I'm reading a book here, a rather long one at that, and I have no time for such stupidities as looking up earlier notes." If the reader *were* to take the time to leaf back however, she would find something very unsettling indeed: if these variant lines are a blunt fabrication of Kinbote's – then what about Shade's poem? What about the commentary we have become so immersed in by now? Yes, the variant lines from the draft did seem a little off when we first read them, but then Kinbote did also mention that he had trouble deciphering them. However – if he made up these lines *completely*, then what does that mean for the rest of the commentary we've been reading, and what does it mean for those parts of it which remain to be read? Could all of this commentary be made up? If Shade never did have the intention to tell us about "a certain king," then what about these stories about the king of Zembla we've been enjoying as a commentary to the poem? Was all this made up, will whatever we are still to learn about Zembla, be made up too?

Well, of course, on some level, we were already aware that it *was* made up – the title page informed us that this commentary was part of *Pale Fire: A Novel*, written by Vladimir Nabokov. But no, we feel, this is different: the revelation of *this* deception by Kinbote cannot be justified in terms of a "willing suspension of disbelief"; this is not part of the sort of agreement we had with the author – this is not the kind of deception we signed up for. Nabokov has us pinned between fictions.

Pale Fire abounds with similar examples of Kinbote's unreliability, and most of them, like the one I've just presented here, have been remarked upon insightfully by

[456] *Pale Fire*, p. 603.

Nabokov criticism. To give another telling example: in his foreword, Kinbote mentions an incident that occurred at the university where he was employed. The head of his department has called him to his office, and:

> urged me "to be more careful." In what sense, careful? A boy had complained to his adviser. Complained of what, good Lord? That I had criticized a literature course he attended ("a ridiculous survey of ridiculous works, conducted by a ridiculous mediocrity"). Laughing in sheer relief, I embraced my good Netochka, telling him I would never be naughty again. I take this opportunity to salute him. He always behaved with such exquisite courtesy toward me that I sometimes wondered if he did not suspect what Shade suspected, and what only three people (two trustees and the president of the college) definitely knew.[457]

This is an ingenuously playful passage. On its surface, we have Kinbote taunting his reader: that which is suspected by Shade, and known only by three people, is Kinbote's royalty, which the reader isn't supposed to learn about until the end of the commentary, when the grand secret is to be divulged.[458] The reader though, and especially the first-time reader, will predominantly be alerted by the plaintive "boy" mentioned in this passage. Just one page ago, he has read a strange remark about not being able to attend "[…] a kind of little seminar at home followed by some table tennis, with two charming identical twins and another boy, another boy," and Kinbote's reaction of "relief" when he learns that the reason the head of his department has called him over, could trigger a suspicion he might have had

[457] *Pale Fire*, p. 452.

[458] There are of course many occasions throughout the commentary where Kinbote accidentally uncloaks this "true identity." One of the things that continually betrays Kinbote is his failure to coherently stick to the form of his third-person narrative. A fine example can be found in the note to "line 71: parents." After succinctly dealing with Shade's parents ("My friend could not evoke the image of his father"), Kinbote makes a brusque transition to the discussion of the parents of the King of Zembla: "Similarly, the King, who also was not quite three when his father, King Alfin died, was unable to recall his face […]." A little later on, however, we read: "One summer before the first world war, when the emperor of a great foreign realm (I realize how few there are to choose from) was paying an extremely unusual and flattering visit to our little hard country, my father took him and a young Zemblan interpreter (whose sex I leave open) in a newly purchased custom-built car on a jaunt in the countryside." "[H]is father" has evolved into "my father" over the course of the anecdote. The fact that the contents of the anecdote concern the King's father's "naïve fits of abstraction" (King Alfin forgets about the emperor halfway during the journey during a break, and even when back at the castle fails to become aware of the latter's absence as expressed by his reaction to "the rather frantic questions that he had left somebody behind": "What emperor?" The joke, potentially, is on the reader who may laugh about this anecdote, without noticing Kinbote's narratorial slip in "my father," and whose absent-mindedness is thus placed on a par with that of King Alfin the Vague. (*Pale Fire*, p. 508-509).

at that point: the reason Kinbote is relieved, conceivably, is that he suspected one of his "boys" had complained about his perversions and/or acts related to this perversion.

The question is: who's deceiving whom here? Two layers of deception are interwoven: Kinbote's hinting at but hiding what he conceives to be his real identity (the king of Zembla), and Nabokov, behind Kinbote's back, hinting at his homosexual adventures with college-aged "boys." The passage becomes more complex, still, when much further on in the commentary, Kinbote makes a seemingly off-handed remark concerning the same period of time: "On the other hand, those mellowing spring days were quite sufferable, my lectures pleased everybody, and I made it a point of attending all the social functions available to me."[459]

Seemingly – for come to think of it: has not Kinbote told us in the foreword that the reason Professor Nattochdag called him in, was that he had been criticized for one of his colleagues' courses? We are forced to make a choice: if Kinbote's "lectures pleased everybody," then the "complaint" he has told us about in the foreword must have been made up. If Kinbote's assertion that the complaint concerned a remark he made about a fellow colleague was true, then this later remark is untrue: if someone came to complain about this, well, then his lectures ostensibly did not please *everybody*. Once again, the reader is pinned between a multiplicity of fictions.

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This by means of an introduction. But to come now to the question that is (could be) of interest to the moral philosopher: what does all this imply for the way we are to morally assess Kinbote's personality? How are we to think of Kinbote's morals? Sure enough, he appears to be making things up, and surely, he seems to behave rather distastefully from the viewpoint of common twentieth-century Western morals, and indeed, John Shade is rather often reduced to the faint shimmer of his last name in Kinbote's commentary to his poem. Our commentator's tendency to overstep the boundaries of modern-day politeness

[459] *Pale Fire*, p. 504.

is undeniable,[460] his behavior often becomes downright obnoxious, he *is* somewhat obsessed with himself, and *does* seem to bother his neighbor[461] a bit too often, and admittedly, lacks the kind of attention to others that Boyd, Rorty, and many others in their wake have reproached him for lacking.

But these things are rather of the order of impoliteness than of the order of "immorality." Kinbote may not be the perfect American family man, but certainly, he does not strike us – at least not on the basis of the above – as a moral monster either. And to condemn the whole of Kinbote's person as "mad" or "immoral" on the basis of this impoliteness, is that not to do injustice to some of the more enjoyable aspects of his character, for has he not given us, after all, a marvelous tale? Are not his Zemblan adventures highly enjoyable for us to read about? Besides his amorous adventures with young men (who seem to be at least of college age, and moreover, "hurt" Kinbote more than he does them), Kinbote does not seem to inflict damage upon any person or animal around him. For sure, his commentary is wild – but does that make him an immoral madman?

Kinbote himself boldly claims: "Personally I have not known any lunatics"[462] and when during a party one of his fellow New Wyeans, Mrs. Hurley calls a mysterious old man a "loony," Shade disagrees: "One should not apply it [that word] to a person who deliberately peels off a drab and unhappy past and replaces it with a brilliant invention. That's merely turning a new leaf with the left hand."[463] When Kinbote himself is let in on the discussion, and is asked his opinion on John Shade's description of this man as "a fellow poet," he quips: "We all are, in a sense, poets, Madam."[464]

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[460] Critic de la Durantaye links this "overstepping" to the "pale" in *Pale Fire*'s title. See: De la Durantaye, Leland. *Style is Matter*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007, pp. 162-163: " 'Pale,' derived from another meaning (the pale beyond which one is not meant to go), can also mean 'fence, boundary, barrier.' It could thus refer to the burning or overstepping of boundaries, which the voyeuristic and decidedly beyond the pale Kinbote repeatedly infringes upon. He does so both literally […] and also metaphorically – overstepping the boundaries of neighborly friendliness, overstepping the bounds of tact and tastefulness in nearly everything he does, overstepping the boundaries of editorial and even juridicial propriety in absconding with Shade's text, and finally overstepping the bounds of a critic and editor in the notes he accompanies Shade's poem with."

[461] Cf. Kinbote's own description: "I mesmerized him with it, I saturated him with my vision, I pressed upon him, with a drunkard's wild generosity, all that I was helpless myself to put into verse." *Pale Fire*, p. 491.

[462] *Pale Fire,* p .610.

[463] *Ibid.*

[464] *Ibid.*

Scenes like these, I think, explicitly confront us, not only with the question of Kinbote's (in)sanity, but also with the larger question concerning the ultimate value of Kinbote's commentary. What is his Zembla, exactly? Is this a poetic creation perhaps on a par with Shade's own poem? Or rather the capricious figment of a madman's mind?

Most readers of the novel eventually lean towards the latter possibility. Based on the fact that a very solid case can be made for the hypothesis that the character of Kinbote is "in reality" (in so far as the word still has any sense in the universe of this multi-layered fiction) only the mask of another character whom we never get to meet directly (a professor of Russian named Botkin),[465] these readers believe that Kinbote-who-is-actually-Botkin's invention of Zembla constitutes a "flight into pity because only pity is left."[466] And if Kinbote's Zembla constitutes a flight, then the main question concerning his personality indeed should become something like the one Boyd asks in his *Nabokov's* Pale Fire*: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*: "just what is the reality he [Kinbote] is trying to flee?"[467] Thus the sort of question these critics ask about Kinbote is in line with the sort of question people have been used to ask about characters from Nabokov novels ever since they first began reading them.[468]

I don't think this question is necessarily misguided, or that we shouldn't ask it (on the contrary, I believe it is a very pertinent question), but I cannot help feeling (maybe these are the "demons"[469] of *my* pity) that the question already contains a negativity that is

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[465] *See Pale Fire*, p. 549, p. 632, and p. 649. Cf. also Pekka Tammi's entry on *Pale Fire*, in: Alexandrov (ed.), *Garland Companion*, p. 574.

[466] See: Wood, *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction*, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

[467] Boyd, Brian. *Nabokov's Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999, p. 90.

[468] Page Stegner was one of the first critics to take the "escapist" line of interrogation in his *Escape into Esthetics: The Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Dial Press, 1966). I should add though, that Stegner's version of the argument is of a much more general nature with regard to *Pale Fire*. See, for this: Stegner, *Escape into Esthetics,* p. 116: "Nabokov's fiction, as we have seen, seems to concern itself consistently with two major problems: the way in which certain horrors of physical reality and finite consciousness can be escaped, and the discovery of a direction or design in the haphazard events of human life." But compare, also, a little further: "*Pale Fire*, though a completely original departure in form, is centrally concerned with these same two themes." The reason I refer to his argument as one "of a more general nature" is that, despite the announcement, I don't think Stegner really works out these specific "themes" in his chapter on *Pale Fire*. It is telling, in this case, that later on in the same chapter he seems to have replaced the "major problems" by what is now called "Nabokov's favorite theme – the reality of appearance" (p. 125). It is in fact predominantly with *this* theme that his chapter on *Pale Fire* is concerned.

[469] The expression is Michael Wood's; cf. *The Magician's Doubts*, *op. cit.*

yet to be proved. For might we not replace the question "what is the reality [Kinbote] is trying to flee?" by a more positive one, such as: what is the fiction Kinbote is trying to find?

Wood describes Zembla as "a consolation which is also a torment,"[470] a neat formula and an insightful observation, but again, one that approaches Kinbote's kingdom rather negatively. What distinguishes Wood from many other critics though, is that he shows awareness of the possibility of a different perspective, especially in a later passage where he comes to speak of "Kinbote's nobility."[471] But then it may be wondered: would not this "nobility" allow us to be a little more generous towards Kinbote? Does it not suggest that instead of "a consolation which is also a torment," we might also speak of a "confrontation with a torment"? And if Zembla *were* the result of such a confrontation, if what this confrontation produces are such beautiful observations as:

> So here was Otar, looking with a puzzled expression at the distant windows of the Queen's quarters, and there were the two girls, side by side, thin-legged, in shimmering wraps, their kitten noses pink, their eyes green and sleepy, their earrings catching and loosing the fire of the sun.[472]

Then, could, should we not be more appreciative of the person that has managed to turn the dregs of his personal suffering – the tossing and turning of a nightmarishly exiled Russian among American dreamers, the frustration of a finicky homosexual vegetarian amongst heterosexual omnivores – into Zembla, the resplendent fantasy of a kingdom where he is a king, where homosexuality is the norm, where his personal stock of fast cars and willing partners never seems to run out?

Of course, Zembla is an invention, but inventions aren't necessarily immoral, do not necessarily point to madness. Recall Shade's observation: one should not too rashly call "a person who deliberately peels off a drab and unhappy past and replaces it with a brilliant invention" a lunatic. And then: Kinbote's invention never seems crude or cruel – often he gets so carried away by fancy that the portrait of his Zembla becomes rather unbelievable, but then again – he never *does* seem to hurt anyone with it. As a commentary, Kinbote's text never even comes close to the sort of intellectual integrity one may expect from a

[470] Wood, *The Magician's Doubts*, p. 186.
[471] Wood, *The Magician's Doubts*, p. 202.
[472] *Pale Fire*, p. 511.

commentary, but then again, what he has offered in lieu of an intellectual commentary *is* a very entertaining and esthetically satisfactory story.

In fact, it seems not unthinkable to go even further, and say: Kinbote's invention of Zembla isn't just artistically valuable – it has moral worth too: it provides him with a means to overcome his daily suffering. To give an example, Kinbote repeatedly reminds us of the fact that he is suffering from his solitude.[473] He describes himself as "a lonesome man"[474] and when, upon having been excluded from John Shade's birthday party by the latter's wife, he decides to confront her with what *he* perceives of as an immoral act, an interesting scene takes place in front of our eyes.

A day after the party, Kinbote visits Shade's wife and offers her a present: the last volume of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. He has marked certain passages in it, passages that are to make her aware of the fact that her not inviting him to Shade's birthday party was particularly cruel of her. If we focus closely on the words Kinbote utters to give Sybil Shade her present, though, someone else's cruelty is hinted at. "Please dip or redip, spider, into this book," Kinbote says, before handing the book to Sybil.[475] Is this just another one of Kinbote's verbal puns, or does it remind us of something we have heard before? Indeed, the phrase echoes a line about Hazel Shade in the poem: "She twisted words: pot, top, / Spider, redips. And Powder was "red wop.' "[476] Once we arrive to Kinbote's annotation of these lines, he remarks: "I am quite sure it was I who one day, when we were discussing "mirror words," observed that "spider" in reverse is "redips" […]. But then it is also true that Hazel Shade resembled me in certain respects."[477] This resemblance between Kinbote and Hazel has been stressed before in his note to line 334:[478] "Out of the lacquered night a white-scarfed beau / Would never come for her […]," upon which Kinbote's annotation reads: " 'Would he ever come for me?' I used to wonder waiting and waiting, in certain amber-and-rose crepuscules, for a ping-pong friend, or for old John Shade." We remember how Hazel,

[473] See for example *Pale Fire*, p. 503: "Solitude is the playfield of Satan. I cannot describe the depths of my loneliness and distress. There was naturally my famous neighbor just across the lane, and at one time I took in a dissipated young roomer (who generally came home long after midnight). Yet I wish to stress that cold hard core of loneliness which is not good for a displaced soul."
[474] *Pale Fire*, p. 554.
[475] *Pale Fire*, p. 554.
[476] *Pale Fire*, lines 347-348, p. 466.
[477] *Pale Fire*, p. 577.
[478] *Pale Fire*, p. 571.

driven to despair by unconfident feelings about her physical appeareance and the cruelty of social exclusion, eventually commits suicide. It is a long leaf from the confrontation between Kinbote and Sybil Shade to Hazel's suicide, but the text works hard to encourage it – and when we have ended up connecting all the dots, it becomes clear that the apparently comic pun "please dip, or redip, spider, into this book" actually underlines something that is not so comic at all: Kinbote suffers severly from his solitary situation.

And yet Kinbote bears no grudge: "I pardon her – her and everybody."[479] Of course, we may not want to believe him when he says this (he definitely seems to be less forgiving at other times), but still, given the nature of Kinbote's suffering (solitude, the feeling of being excluded), and given the way he eventually seems to have come to deal with it (his invention of Zembla), I do not think we should be too rash in our moral judgment: perhaps Kinbote was no madman, perhaps he was just another solitary man on the margins who tried to overcome his suffering by dealing with it in an inventive way, in a way that allowed him not to get swallowed up by grief and spiteful feelings against the people surrounding him. Kinbote specifies somewhere that the Zemblan peninsula is "cut off basally by an impassable canal from the mainland of madness,"[480] and it is perhaps not impossible to conceive of the creative process of inventing Zembla as just such an "impassable canal" – not the testimony or the expression of his madness, but precisely, what allows him to keep sane, the fortress walls he has decided to erect between the self and what threatens it with the ultimate despair of madness – the painful otherness of the New Wye environment.

All this is not to say that we should simply grant Kinbote moral absolution and be done with it. The attempt here has been, rather, to indicate that beyond the position of many Nabokovians stating that Kinbote is either a madman who deserves our pity or a liar deserving moral reproof, we should allow at least for the possibility that he may solicit a different reaction. To open up this possibility, to make it available, we do not have to deny the validity or perspicacity of earlier evaluations of the novel; we may only want to rephrase them to a certain extent. The main revision would be to replace the "flight" vocabulary with a "search" vocabulary, and the vocabulary around "consolation" with one centered on "confrontation." This doesn't mean to claim straightaway that what Kinbote

[479] *Pale Fire*, p. 561.
[480] *Pale Fire*, p. 535.

ended up "finding" is actually to be lauded morally, nor does it force us into concluding that Kinbote's confrontation has resulted in moral victory – this is precisely what still needs to be found out.

If one accepts that Kinbote's Zembla is determined by a confrontation between the suffering self and the reality that surrounds it, then the central question for making up our minds anent Kinbote's morality becomes: what judgment are we to cast on the way(s) Kinbote deals with the challenge of his identity – with what he is, and what he seeks to become? We've already touched upon this question in connection to Humbert Humbert and the problem of temporality in the previous chapter. Yet this is a vast question, and before I try to answer it with regard to Kinbote, I want to pause for a bit and linger on some thoughts concerning the question in general, this time from the perspective of a different thematic and a different thinker. Supposing the problematic of Kinbote's struggles with his identity are at the very core of this question, who better to turn to than the thinker who has written a book with the elegant subtitle: "How One Becomes What One Is" ["Wie man wird, was man ist"]?

7.2. Nietzsche: Tasks and Resolutions

What I intend to do in this section, is to step back from *Pale Fire* and the problematic I've just sketched, and have a look at the way a similar problematic is treated in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche. My hope is that this step back will eventually allow us to leap forward into Nabokov's *Pale Fire* with enriched thoughts and renewed zest.

Nietzsche was and remains a Proteus amongst philosophers – one has a hard time deciding where to pick him up, or, for that matter, when and where to put him down again. But one has to start somewhere, and given I've already mentioned the subtitle of *Ecce Homo*, I might as well start from there. *Ecce Homo*, which Nietzsche wrote barely a year before his mind was to be silenced by madness, as if somehow he had already suspected

what was coming for him, gives us something of a summary and evaluation of his philosophy as he had been able to write it down thus far.[481]

I imagine a reader two hundred years hence who may not be as familiar with Nietzsche's persona as we are now. Having come across his name in the dust-dampened pages of a musty old encyclopedia, and having seen attributed to this name (which, as she reads it out loud in German, sounds somewhat like a muffled sneeze, the collision of a squeak and a sigh) the lofty epithet "philosopher," she has decided to pick up this book (not too long, funny title) and starts to read, expecting to find in it what she has been taught to expect of a "philosophical" book. I assume that after the first three chapters her eyebrows will have risen well beyond the rim of the last wrinkle on her forehead. "Who is this strange man, telling me why I'd better believe him when he says he is 'so wise,' 'so clever,' explaining to me 'why he writes such good books'? And why is he telling me all these things about his diet, and what do I care about him drinking coffee or not? What does all *this* have to do with *philosophy*? And why is he evaluating his own works – isn't this someone else's task, don't we have critics and appraisers and reviewers for that?"

Indeed, she may feel that the person speaking here is either a divine jester, or a terrible braggart, or perhaps a man so respected by his fellows that he had become just a little too presumptuous and self-assured. Risking a rather wild hypothesis, we may even deem the reaction of this reader to be somewhat similar to the sort of reaction towards Kinbote the unsuspecting first-time reader of *Pale Fire* may experience (as described above). But let us not get carried away by uncorroborated hypotheses.

We who are in the know – or believe we are – about Nietzsche, are still very much aware of the fact that there is a great deal of irony in hearing all these self-sufficient remarks from a philosopher who had practically no audience to speak of and more critics than admirers.[482] And beyond all the irony, beyond the joviality of the jester, there are

[481] A relative remark, by which I don't mean to say that Nietzsche was ready to finish off his philosophical career when he wrote down the text of *Ecce Homo* – the project of the grand revaluation of all values was still to come.

[482] Not all philosophers have accepted the interpretation that the underlying tone of the text is one of univocal irony. See, for example, William Desmond's comments on *Ecce Homo* in: *Art, Origins, Otherness: Between Philosophy and Art* (New York: SUNY Press , 2003). On p. 192, Desmond writes: "There is often much of self-mockery in the too much of his [Nietzsche's] self-inflation. He will trumpet in *Ecce Homo*: Why I Am a Destiny. Is this a way of bringing the two, the "I" and fate together? But one is not entirely sure if Nietzsche has his tongue in his cheek in proclaiming himself a destiny. He seems to be laughing at himself – lightly. But then

many valuable things to be found in Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*, in *his* account of "who he is" ["wer ich bin"].[483] For example, a thought he lets us in on while discussing what he deems to be his greatest book (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*) elucidates what he conceives of as his task as a philosopher: "Zarathustra once defines, quite strictly, his task – it is mine, too – and there is no mistaking his meaning: he says Yes to the point of justifying, of redeeming even all of the past."[484] To illustrate more extensively what he means by this "redeeming even all of the past," Nietzsche goes on to cite from his *Zarathustra*:

> I walk among men as among the fragments of the future – that future which I envisage. And this is all my creating and striving, that I create and carry together into One what is fragment and riddle and dreadful accident. And how could I bear to be a man if man were not also a creator and guesser of riddles and redeemer of accidents? *To redeem those who lived in the past* and to turn every "it was" into a "thus I willed it" – that alone should I call redemption.[485]

If we may equate the "task" Nietzsche is describing for himself here with the sort of being he seeks to be, the sort of self he wants his philosophical persona to be, than it seems Nietzsche's conception of man is rather self-reliant: "to become what one is," as it appears here, is to take up arms against all that is fragmentary and accidental, and mold oneself into a unity, "to create and carry together into One what is fragment and riddle and dreadful accident." A little further, Nietzsche will add that he conceives of man as "[…] an un-form, a material, an ugly stone that needs a sculptor."[486]

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there is no doubt but that the excess of a megalomania – laughable but no joke – is not far below the surface. It certainly breaks through the surface in *Ecce Homo* when he informs humanity in full seriousness that *Zarathustra* is perhaps the greatest gift ever offered to it."

[483] Nietzsche, *Ecce Home*, "Vorwort," section 1. Cited from: Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morals/Ecce Homo* (transl. Kaufmann). New York: Vintage, 1989, p .217.

[484] Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, "Also Sprach Zarathustra," section 8, *op. cit.,* p. 308.

[485] *Ibid.* Original German: "Ich wandle unter Menschen als unter Bruchstücken der Zukunft: jener Zukunft, die ich schaue. Und das ist all mein Dichten und Trachten, dass ich Eins dichte und zusammentrage, was Bruchstück ist und Räthsel und grauser Zufall. Und wie ertrüge ich es Mensch zu sein, wenn der Mensch nicht auch Dichter und Räthselrather und Erlöser des Zufalls wäre? Die *Vergangnen zu erlösen* und alles "Es war" umzuschaffen in ein "So wollte ich es!" – das hiesse mir erst Erlösung." (all German quotes provided in the footnotes to block citations over the course of this chapter are cited from the "Digitale Kritische Gesamtausgabe" (eKGWB), a digital text based on the standard edition by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1967). Digital text edited by Paolo D'Iorio and published by Nietsche Source.

[486] Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo, op. cit.*, p. 309.

Of course, the "task" of which Nietzsche speaks can be conceived of from a more general perspective as well, and a lot more is at stake here then just Nietzsche's conception of what he wants for "himself." But nonetheless the passage can still be read as bespeaking an important Nietzschean insight concerning selfhood. Thus, "To turn every 'it was' in to a 'thus I willed it' " as I read it here, means first and foremost: out of the confrontation with everything that is accidental and fragmentary – that is out of the confrontation with reality as it has offered itself to me in its most rigid form – to have crafted myself to be what *I* wanted to be, as far as the capabilities of my "self" allowed for this. That I may at present be able to say: "Thus I willed it, this is who I have wanted to become." This is a self who can assuredly say it has created itself, is its own creation. It seems we aren't too far away here from Hegel's will that wills itself,[487] Kant's autonomous subject,[488] or Emerson's emblematic man of self-reliance here.[489] We are like ugly stones, and only through creation

[487] For a recent account that linking the "evil twins" Hegel and Nietzsche on the topic of individuality, see: Church, Jeffrey. *Infinite Autonomy: The Divided Individual in the Thought of G. W. F. Hegel and Friedrich Nietzsche*. University Park: Penn State University Press, 2012. (See p. ix for the epithet borrowed above.) Church focuses mainly on the problematic of individuality from the perspective of political philosophy, but also offers some very insightful remarks on the relation between Nietzsche's more general thoughts on individuality and Hegel's stance on the subject. Cf. particularly pp. 111-139.

[488]After what has been divulged about the relationship between Nietzsche and Kant in the chapter on *Ada* above, this *rapprochement* between the two may come as a surprise. And indeed, there are many subjects on which Nietzsche and Kant can be found at opposite ends of the philosophical spectrum. Yet over the course of the last century, especially in French philosophy, a tendency can be seen to attempt to bring the two German arch-enemies, at least on some topics, somewhat closer together again. Cf. for example: Nancy, Jean-Luc. "Notre Probité ! (sur la vérité au sens moral chez Nietzsche.)" In: *Revue de théologie et de philosophie*, no. 30, 1980, pp. 391-407. Especially, p. 403: « Faut-il donc mettre ou lire Kant dans Nietzsche – au moins dans le Nietzsche de cet aphorisme [i.e., paragraph 335 of the *Gay Science*] ? C'est en effet ce que je crois indispensable, et non pas comme une opération sophistiquée (et sophistique), mais bien comme le seul moyen de pénétrer de manière satisfaisante à l'intérieur de la *Redlichkeit* [probity]. " Cf. also : Deleuze, Gilles. *La Philosophie de Nietzsche*. Paris: PUF, 2007(1962), p. 59: "[…] nous croyons qu'il n'y a pas seulement chez Nietzsche une descendance Kantienne, mais une rivalité mi-avouée mi-cachée. […] Une transformation radicale du kantisme, une réinvention de la critique que Kant trahissait en même temps qu'il la concevait, une reprise du projet critique sur de nouvelles bases et avec de nouveaux concepts, voilà ce que Nietzsche semble avoir cherché (et avoir trouvé dans « l'éternel retour » et « la volonté de puissance »."

[489] It must be added that once we start to delve deeper into Nietzsche's philosophy (as we will in a moment), it will turn out that there are fundamental differences between Kant's notion of autonomy and Nietzsche's. For a solid and nuanced account of these differences, see: Sokoloff, William. "Nietzsche's Radicalization of Kant." In: *Polity*, vol. 38, no. 4, October 2006, pp. 501-518. A formulation on p. 515 neatly sums up his thoughts on the relation between Kant's notion of autonomy and Nietzsche's: "In contrast to the Kantian version, Nietzschean autonomy is not an experience of the self's sovereignty over the flux of the world. Rather, Nietzschean autonomy *is* the flux of the world transposed into the core of the self." One may doubt, however, if the latter formulation does not always rest – at least to some extent – upon the inclusion of the former. It is only once I have attained a certain level of sovereignty over that which is other, that I can start "transposing" it "into the core" of what I am.

and will-power may we turn these stones into works of art, may we turn ourselves into something that we and others can admire.

I think Nietzsche's words allow for such an interpretation, at least at this particular point, and in this particular passage.[490] For if we turn to the original passage in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, things start to get more complicated than they appear to be in *Ecce Homo*, and we find a far more nuanced version of Nietzsche's conception. At first, the remainder of the original passage in *Zarathustra* seems even more affirmative of Nietzsche's belief in the potencies of creation and the power of the will: " 'Will,' Zarathustra boldly says, 'that is the name of the liberator and joy-bringer.' " But then, all of a sudden, Zarathustra seems to lower his voice a notch, when he adds:

> […] but now learn this too: the will itself is still a prisoner. Willing liberates; but what is it that puts even the liberator himself in fetters? "It was" – that is the name of the will's gnashing of teeth and most secret melancholy. Powerless against what has been done, he is an angry spectator of all that is past. The will cannot will backwards; and that he cannot break time and time's covetousness, that is the will's loneliest melancholy.[491]

Zarathustra has come upon the cripples and beggars of this scene "heavy with future," to use a favorite expression of Nietzsche's, as the epitome of "a seer, a willer, a creator, a future himself and a bridge to the future," but, as is also announced, himself "as it were, a cripple at this bridge." And it is this "as it were" ("auch," "auch noch gleichsam") that comes back to haunt him in the above passage. To take up one's future, to be one's own destiny, to turn one's self into the result of a will that has willed itself – if that is to be the ultimate form of creation, and if in this creation redemption ("Erlösung") is finally to be found – then the problem for the autonomous creator is potentially huge. For suddenly a bump on the

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[490] Cf. previous note.

[491] Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, part II, "On Redemption" (transl. Kaufmann). Cited from: *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: The Viking Press, 1976, p. 251). German original: "Und nun lernt diess hinzu: der Wille selber ist noch ein Gefangener. Wollen befreit: aber wie heisst das, was auch den Befreier noch in Ketten schlägt? "Es war": also heisst des Willens Zähneknirschen und einsamste Trübsal. Ohnmächtig gegen das, was gethan ist – ist er allem Vergangenen ein böser Zuschauer. Nicht zurück kan der Wille wollen; dass er die Zeit nicht brechen kann und der Zeit begierde, – das ist des Willens einsamste Trübsal." (eKGWB) Cf. also: "Creation – that is the great redemption from suffering, and life's growing light." To be able to say: "Thus my creative will, my destiny, wills it. […] this very destiny – my will wills." (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra,* part II, "Upon the Blessed Isles," *op. cit.*, p. 199.)

road to self-creation, on the road to becoming one's own bridge to the future has stuck up its head: the will, upon which both my creativity and futurity are dependent, turns out not to be able to "will backward." The will, as a general principle of creativity, may allow for a breaking out of the present into the future – but it cannot operate the other way around – it cannot "break time's covetousness." And as far as the will still belongs to *a human being*, this is a problem for autonomous self-creation: to break out of one's present self into a future self, one must at least *pass through* a past self. The notion of the "loneliest melancholy of the will" ("des Willens einsamste Trübsal"), as *I* read it, somehow shows an awareness of the limits of creation, especially when it comes to self-creation, to creating oneself as a future. And when Zarathustra seems to pick up the same stone Nietzsche picked up in *Ecce Homo*, the stone of which Nietzsche said that it was "ugly" and in need of a "sculptor," and Zarathustra now says: " 'that which was' is the name of the stone he [the prisoner/the imprisoned will] cannot will," one is tempted to think he is again showing respect for something that transcends the grasp of autonomous creativity and upon which autonomy may ultimately founder.

But ultimately, to interpret the passage in this latter sense is something neither Nietzsche nor Zarathustra seems to completely allow for. Those readers who are familiar with the section I've been citing from here may and will certainly point out that I've skipped over one very important word in my analysis, one that was right at the beginning of the passage I cited: the word "still." Zarathustra doesn't say that the will is a prisoner: he is saying that it is "*still* a prisoner" (my emphasis). And the will's "loneliest melancholy" of which I tried to make so much, is to him, far from a metaphysical condition of the will, only thought of as a historical (read from a larger perspective) or temporary (read from a more personal perspective) phase, i.e., a provisional phase in the ultimate development and efflorescence of the will.

Zarathustra will eventually conclude that all this is but the "will's folly," a "folly" that has to be overcome, and at the end of the section veers back to the sort of vocabulary we have come to expect of him: "all 'it was' is a fragment, a riddle, a dreadful accident – until

the creative will says to it, 'But thus I willed it.' Until the creative will says to it, 'But thus I will it; thus I shall will it.' "[492]

If this is the "task" Nietzsche has in store for the self,[493] then, it seems of portentous weight indeed. And yet, as Zarathustra will keep repeating,[494] if we really want to be able to come to terms with the ultimate question of what is good and what is evil, this confrontation of the self with its past and its future, its grounds and its abysses, its determinations and its potencies, is inevitable: "what is good and evil *no one knows yet*, unless it be he who creates."[495] To take such remarks seriously means to accept the will to creativity as an absolute moral demand. Nietzsche's "good" man is by necessity a creative man. The successfully creative man is he who manages to bear a double burden: first the one that others have loaded upon him; secondly, the burden he is to himself. In fact, when Zarathustra explicitly describes this second burden ("verily, much that is our *own*, is also a grave burden!"),[496] we may be inclined to think, perhaps hope, that Zarathustra, like earlier in the passage on the melancholy of the will, is on the verge of granting us some respite. If the nature of the task of creativity is such that it makes us a burden to ourselves, well then perhaps, we think or hope, we may be forgiven for not being able to realize ourselves as absolute creations, may be granted some form of absolution even if we fail to live up to the enormity of the task? Alas, Zarathustra is relentless, for although "much that is inside man is like an oyster: nauseating and slippery and hard to grasp," there is an "art" we "must" learn: "to *have* a shell and shiny sheen and shrewd blindness."[497]

Not unexpectedly, the invocation that concludes the section *On Old and New Tablets* is not an invocation of God or of gods, but an invocation of the will, in fact almost an elegy to it. That Zarathustra may one day "be ready for myself, and my most hidden will," that is

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[492] *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, part II, "On Redemption," *op. cit.*, p. 253.
[493] I'm still reading these remarks through the prism of what Nietzsche described as his task in *Ecce Homo*, despite the fact that there is obviously much more at play in this passage. One can read into it Nietzsche's struggle with Christian morality, the democratic notion of justice, and much more – I opt to stick to reading this passage as saying something about *personal* wills, not the weakened will of *ressentiment* in general, or the vengefulness of Christianity.
[494] Cf. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, part III, "On Old and New Tablets," section 3, *op. cit.*, p. 310, where Zarathustra repeats his earlier *propos* on Redemption verbatim: "to redeem with their creation all that *has been*. To redeem what is past in man and to re-create all 'it was' until the will says, 'Thus I willed it! Thus I shall will it' – this I called redemption and this alone I taught them to call redemption."
[495] *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, part III, "On Old and New Tablets," section 2, *op. cit.*, p. 308.
[496] *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, part III, "On the Spirit of Gravity," section 2, *op. cit.*, p. 305.
[497] *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *op. cit.*, pp. 305-306.

the hope he expresses. At first glance, a clear message, in tune with what Zarathustra has been saying all along: to have faith in the force of creativity, in the commands of autonomy, in our capacity to be self-commanding, self-legislating. God, Science, History, Happiness, even Truth – those are old heteronomical vocabularies the truly autonomous and creative self manages to safely ignore. What does the creative self have to do with all that? Her task is to create, solely to create.

And yet a strange tension starts to become visible in this ultimate invocation of the will. A tension that is present perhaps not so much in the concrete terminology of the kind of desires expressed here, but more in the overall form in which these desires are expressed: for – how could a self-sufficient (wo)man ever feel the need to *invoke* someone or something at all? Even worse: how can he make sure that the invocation does not gradually become a supplication? From the moment Zarathustra exclaims "O thou my will!" he is in trouble. For to address *my* will thus, implies I am to *ask* something of it, means that I am *in need* of something. The moment I start invoking my will, a distance (be it ever so small) is introduced between me and my will: I can no longer refer to myself as a will that wills itself. My claim to autonomy is at risk now: I can no longer say that it is only *me* who gives myself the law, I can no longer say that I am wholly my own creation, that I am what I am only at my responsibility. Heteronomy has secretly reintroduced itself: there is something between myself and my will that is not determined by me. What is this heteronomy?

"That I may one day be ready and ripe in the great noon […]" Zarathustra chants. Maybe it is in this "one day" that the source of the tension is to be found. The fact that the self, be it a self that conceives itself to be the project of an autonomous process of creation, remains a self that is always not only bound by the joys or melancholies of what it was, but also, and perhaps even more, by everything it is not yet or has yet to become, means that it can *never* avoid some degree of heteronomy. This heteronomy, related to the futurity of the self, is fundamentally unavoidable for those who believe in creativity. Creativity's relative openness is what closes it off to absolute openness. The reason I can think of myself as a project open to creation in the first place, is precisely that I can never fully determine what I (this self) will look like in the last place. Once one relates the process of creation to a concept of an autonomous will, a tension must necessarily arise: the will that is a will unto

itself can perhaps (if it is strong enough) arrive at a point where it may say: "thus I willed it," but it will never be able to say: "Thus I will will it." The will cannot will what is not yet – even though it may afterwards be able to convince itself that this is how it willed it, for now, it can only say: "Thus I *hope* it will be" – and that is exactly what the final passage of *Zarathustra*, "On Old and New Tablets," finally amounts to: it expresses a hope for the future.

Nietzsche, although his rhetoric sometimes seems to contradict it, was not blind to all this. In fact, I think it is a tension quite similar to the one I have been trying to describe that forms one of the main concerns of Nietzsche's philosophy. Up until now, I have only been discussing the will in the context of personality and in relation to the task of self-creation. But there is, next to this, also a different "kind" of will in Nietzsche's work that I have not yet given any attention at all, a principle (in the Greek sense of *archè*) which, once taken into account, would force us to render our propos about Nietzsche a bit more nuanced. I'm referring, indeed, to what Nietzsche calls the will to power.

The will to power is an indifferent principle. As such, although it is of course no simple law of science in the modern sense of that word, it has the sort of ultimacy to it that one could associate with the Greek notion of a founding principle or archè.[498] The will to power is not a principle that governs reality, it simply "is": "this is how it is," or, "this is how things are going" seem to be the words that express it best. Hence traditional morality, which has always been unable to recognize the predominance of such an ultimate force, is "something that must be overcome."[499] If the actual essence of the world is will to power, then any project that seeks for a rational foundation of an altruistic discourse on ethics is doomed to fail.[500] In fact, morality as such can never hope to ever become more than a mere "sign language of the affects."[501] The underlying thought, it seems, is that morals are fed by something, driven by something, can be interpreted as expressions of something else; but never founded upon any rational or transcendental principle. The only successful founding principle could be the "will to power," but the will to power is an immanent

[498] Cf. Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil*, section 22 (transl. Kaufmann). New York: Vintage Books, 1966.
[499] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, section 32.
[500] Cf. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, section 186.
[501] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, section 187.

principle, an ultimate principle. As such, it cannot be brought into agreement with any traditional form of morality, which always seeks after something, serves some purpose or other, wants to instill some kind of discipline, aims to proclaim an obligation. The will to power is tragically out of tune with this purposiveness of morality – it has no purpose, or better, it is its own purpose. As such only a god could wriggle its way behind the will to power and seek to steer it one way or another – but we are not gods, and there is no "behind".

The will to power promotes one thing, and one thing only: life. As such it constitutes both the epitome of ultimacy and the epitome of dynamism. The fact that the will to power is ultimately nothing but the expression of this propagation of life, ever more life, means that a certain degree of tragedy is necessarily cast upon *our* lives. We all want to become what we are, but at some point, there will have to be a clash between the destiny we had in mind for ourselves, the ultimate goal of our creative will, and the way the "archestral" will to power wills things to be.

This confrontation between the potencies of what we think we are and the rigid actuality of what we are given to be is probably the longest and hardest of confrontations; and it seems that the reason Nietzche attaches so much value elsewhere[502] to a concept like *amor fati* is because to be capable of love for one's destiny *is* exactly to have resolved an important part of the tension of this confrontation.[503] Even if loving one's destiny is not to have done away with the confrontation, it at least allows for some sort of acceptance of the confrontation,[504] that is, acceptance, not in the passive sense of the word, but in the sense

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[502] I have in mind especially *Ecce Homo* (see note below) and *The Gay Science.* (See for example: *The Gay Science*, paragraph 276.)

[503] For Nietzsche's most concrete definition of *Amor fati*, see: *Ecce Homo*, *op. cit.*, p. 258: "My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati.* That one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backwards, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it – all idealism is mendaciousness in the face of what is necessary – but *love* it.

[504] A recent article by Béatrice Han-Pile ("Nietzsche and Amor Fati." In: *European Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2011, pp. 224-262) argues, in somewhat different terms, that for example when it comes to dealing with suffering, *amor fati* should not just be conceived of as a negative device, but also "a positive state" (p. 240). Linking Nietzsche's use of "amor" in the expression of "amor fati" to the greek notion of the *agape,* she argues that Nietzsche's stance of amor fati offers a sort of "existential transformation," and that "this existential transformation will in turn allow us a sort of happiness which neither resignation nor rebellion could ever bring us" (p. 241). This "agapic" notion of amor fati is not always in line with Nietzsche at his more belligerent moments, but it does remind us to remain aware of the special tension that is at play in Nietzsche's notion of *amor fati*; a tension that will have to be resolved in favor of some form of acceptance, yet that can never be reduced to sheer resignation. Against Han-Pile, I would argue that the decisive factor when

of having created a self that has accepted the need for an active confrontation with the whole of life, with everything that life has in store for it.

What does all this imply for the sort of "task" I have been discussing in connection to *Ecce Homo* and *Zarathustra*? Does Nietzsche's introduction of the notion of the will to power finally offer us some degree of *relief* from the sort of burden that we are to ourselves? Does Nietzsche's *amor fati* contain a possibility for resignation that Zarathustra's notion of redemption excludes? I'm afraid the answer is still "three times no," for the kind of reunion of necessity and freedom[505] that the will to power incites us to be finally forces upon us perhaps the greatest task of all: to overcome ourselves and become ourselves wills to power. But this would demand a radical reinterpretation and eventually, a revaluation of everything traditional morality told us we should aim to become, for in that case the *moral value* of our lives does not depend on how nice we have or have not been to our fellow men, or on the degree of "happiness" we have been able to reach during our lives, but on something else altogether: it depends on the extent to which we have been able to create ourselves as sources of absolute creative value, to what extent we have succeeded in creating ourselves as life-promoting wills to power. Traditional moral notions concerning "suffering," "pity," and "happiness" do not count from the perspective of the demands of the will to power; creativity, self-overcoming, promotion of life: those are the things that are morally decisive in this scheme. Recall, in this connection, Zarathustras' final remarks: "My suffering and my pity for suffering – what does it matter? Am I concerned with *happiness*? I am concerned with my *work*."[506]

Thus the man of the future, as Nietzsche conceives of him, has no mean task. No wonder that when he addresses these "men of the future" directly in *Beyond Good and Evil*, the tone he adopts reminds us, not in the first place of a philosopher who preaches truth, but rather of a leader who seeks to inspire courage: "To teach man the future of man as his

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it comes to amor fati, is not whether this acceptance is of the order of patient agape or of violent eros, but whether what is accepted can be redescribed in terms of our own creativity. Whether the "yes" to that which is other than and given to the self, can be conceived of as not *just* a yes of acceptation, but moreover as a "yes" that affirms the givenness of what is other because it knows this givenness can somehow be mediated through that which the self knows *it will be able to give* to this given.

[505] Nietzsche's lodestar for this unity of necessity and freedom of the will is the figure of the artist ("Künstler"). Cf. *Beyond Good and Evil*, *op. cit.*, section 213.

[506] Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *op. cit.*, p. 439.

will, as dependent upon a human will, and to prepare great ventures and over-all attempts of discipline and cultivation by way of putting an end to that gruesome dominion of nonsense and accident that has so far been called "history."[507] Nietzsche goes on:

> At some time new types of philosophers and commanders will be necessary for that, and whatever has existed on earth of concealed, terrible, and benevolent spirits, will look pale and dwarfed by comparison. It is the image of such leaders that *we* envisage: may I say this out loud, you free spirits? The conditions that one would have partly to create and partly to exploit for their genesis; the probable ways and tests that would enable a soul to grow to such a height and force that it would feel the *compulsion* for such tasks; a revaluation of values under whose new pressure and hammer a conscience would be steeled, a heart turned to bronze.[508]

What is interesting about this passage is that it shows the importance Nietzsche, like in *Ecce Homo*, like in *Zarathustra*, still attaches to the notion of the "task." The revaluation of values and the attempt to "teach man the future of man as his will" is, explicitly, announced as a "task." And then the word is used again in Nietzsche's description of the way he imagines his program to be carried out by mankind: "With a single glance he sees what, given a favorable accumulation and increase of forces and tasks, might *yet be made of man*."[509] Finally, Nietzsche ends this fifth *Hauptstück* of *Beyond Good and Evil* by emphasizing: "anyone who has once thought through this possibility to the end knows one kind of nausea that other men don't know – but perhaps also a *new task*!"[510] What is Nietzsche hinting at by stressing that this teaching "man the future of man as his *will*," is a "task"?

As I see it, there are at least two ways of reading this passage. First, there is the fascist reading of the passage, which would proclaim the task Nietzsche proposes here is

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[507] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good And Evil*, *op. cit.*, section 203.
[508] *Ibid.* German original: "[…] dazu wird irgendwann einmal eine neue Art von Philosophen und Befehlshabern nöthig sein, an deren Bilde sich Alles, was auf Erden an verborgenen, furchtbaren und wohlwollenden Geistern dagewesen ist, blass und verzwergt ausnehmen möchte. Das Bild solcher Führer ist es, das vor unsern Augen schwebt: — darf ich es laut sagen, ihr freien Geister? Die Umstände, welche man zu ihrer Entstehung theils schaffen, theils ausnützen müsste; die muthmaasslichen Wege und Proben, vermöge deren eine Seele zu einer solchen Höhe und Gewalt aufwüchse, um den Zwang zu diesen Aufgaben zu empfinden; eine Umwerthung der Werthe, unter deren neuem Druck und Hammer ein Gewissen gestählt, ein Herz in Erz verwandelt würde, dass es das Gewicht einer solchen Verantwortlichkeit ertrüge […]." (eKGWB.)
[509] *Ibid.*
[510] *Ibid.*

that we adhere to some sort of belief that man can be improved, who knows, maybe even eugenically, if only the powerful become masters, first of themselves, then of others. This is a controversial reading, and people like Walter Kaufmann and others have fought hard to keep contemporary readers far away from this sort of interpretation of Nietzsche's works – and although passages like these can and have been *used* for such purposes, I think we can safely put such a reading aside as somewhat short-sighted.[511]

Secondly, there is the possibility of interpreting Nietzsche's "task" here as expressing an open hope for the future; a future where mankind might act more independently, be more self-reliant, come to see life as its playground, as something waiting to be invented by it – an interpretation that seems to combine some of the positive social hope of neo-pragmatist philosophy[512] and the kind of experimentalist interpretation of Nietzsche that will be explored in one of the sections below.[513]

But next to these two interpretations, a third possible reading can be presented. If we look closely at Nietzsche's citation, our attention is caught by something that glitters, rather palely but still, amongst the monochrome mass of all these general promises: "the heart turned to bronze." And this burnished heart may remind us of something, or rather, of someone. For where did we abandon Zarathustra? Where did we last see him? On his mountain – and what did his face look like before he told us "well then, *that* [pity for the higher man], has had its time! My suffering and my pity for suffering – what does it matter? Am I concerned with *happiness*? I am concerned with my work." Indeed, his face had

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[511] To provide one example of a once very popular account of Nietzschean philosophy as "anti-individualistic," we could refer here to Crane Brinton's *Nietzsche*, which has become famous for its insinuations of a relationship between Nietzsche and the Nazis. He writes: "the Nazi intellectuals are followers, not of Locke and Voltaire, but of Nietzsche; and Nietzsche, wherever he led, did not lead towards the rights of man." See: Brinton, Crane. *Nietzsche*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1941 (2nd printing), p. xvii. Cf. also pp. 200ff. For Kaufmann's refutation of such insinuations, one may consult, among many other sources, his introduction to *The Portable Nietzsche* (*op. cit.*). A more recent article dealing with the relationship between Nietzsche and Nazism, explicitly reacting to Brinton's account, can be found in: Santaniello, Weaver. "Nietzsche: Half a Nazi? A response to Crane Brinton." In: *Ethics, Art, and Representations of the Holocaust* (ed. Gigliotti, Golomb, Gould). Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2014, pp. 159-171.

[512] I am thinking in particular of Rorty's *Philosophy and Social Hope*. Cf. for a discussion of this work, chapter 3 above.

[513] Cf. for a much more moderate, less "utopian" (in comparison to Rorty) example of an interpretation that is more "hopeful": Van Tongeren, Paul. *Reinterpreting Modern Culture: An Introduction to Nietzsche's Philosophy*. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2000, pp. 209-210. Van Tongeren reads the invocatory part of *Beyond Good and Evil* (section 203) as Nietzsche's reminder that despite the "massive uniformity" that seems to characterize much of morality in modern society, there still exists a possibility for liberating ourselves from the demands of uniformity and "the deadly domination of one type of morality."

"changed to bronze." Am I making too much out of what could be a coincidence? Possibly. But then again: these aren't two loose lumps of bronze that I'm haphazardly clunking against one another – a third ring can be added to wield these two together and produce something that starts to look more like a chain. For how did Zarathustra express himself when, phyllodically invoking "his will," he asked for ripeness in the great noon? Indeed – he said he wished to be "as ready and ripe as glowing bronze." Bronze on bronze on bronze. A slow canticle of thuds.

The bronze heart in section 203 from *Beyond Good and Evil* can be made to produce a small spark when brought into contact with Zarathustra's bronzing. What I take the connection to hint at, is that Nietzsche's mind, as he was writing about this "new task," was not just concerned with giving expression to a general direction for mankind, saying that man should come to perceive the future as man's will, but that he was also implying this task to be a personal one. In fact, not only does he do this by creating a sparkling connection between the generality of the task described here and the personal nature of what Zarathustra thinks of as his "work," he also hints at it by the recurrence from the generality of the plural ("new types of philosophers," "such leaders," "we") to a singular mode of expression ("a soul," "a heart," "a conscience").

But, you may say – doesn't this mean we're getting close to the second position again, the position of moral hopefulness, according to which Nietzsche is spreading a personal message somewhat along the lines of: "life is yours for the taking; design your own future; invent yourself to be who you want to be"? If we were approaching this position, that would be problematic indeed, for such a position would be hard to reconcile with the rigidity of reality that seems to underlie at least part of such Nietzschean conceptions as *amor fati* and the will to power. What about that? Should we conclude then, that Nietzsche is simply contradicting himself? That he simply had his vigorous hopeful moods one day, and his more fatalistic moods on other days – that this passage shows him to be in the first mood, whereas other passages may show him to be in the latter?[514]

[514] A different solution to this problem (different to the one I am about to offer below) can be found in: Müller-Lauter, Wolfgang. *Nietzsche. His Philosophy of Contradictions and the Contradictions of His Philosophy* (transl. David J. Parent). Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999, pp. 120-121. Müller-Lauter resolves the tension by making a distinction between two types of Nietzschean overman, the "wise" overman, and the "powerful" or "strong" overman. The "wise" overman "[…] is concerned with dissolving in the stream of

I don't think we have to, at least, not necessarily, not yet. For I think Nietzsche has instilled this passage with yet another fascinating ambiguity, one that pays respect to exactly the rigid dynamicity that is attached to the will to power and the *amor fati* it imposes upon us, *and* the sort of absolute desire for creativity, self-sufficiency, and autonomous willing that he is trying to teach us at other times. To spot it, we have to look a little closer at the word that started off my investigation of Nietzsche and that hasn't stopped returning since: the word "task." In order to get a better understanding of this word, we need to extend our vision beyond the English translation of the word. Because to really press Nietzsche, to really push him to his limits, we have to turn to the original German word he uses, which is "Aufgabe."

The first meaning of the word *Aufgabe* is indeed "task." But there is more to the word in German than just this first meaning. First of all, the word *Aufgabe* isn't always used neutrally: the "task" can be a challenging one, and this is in fact a second common meaning of the word *Aufgabe*: "challenge." But *beyond* this second meaning of "challenge," the word *Aufgabe* contains a third meaning. This third meaning bespeaks an ambiguity in its core that allows it to gradually shade into almost its opposite: the word *Aufgabe* can also give expression to what happens when the task has become *too* challenging: the act of *abandoning* the task. This third dimension, which is most clearly expressed once the noun *Aufgabe* is turned into the verb *aufgeben*, refers to the abandonment of a task or a challenge, *auf-geben*: to give up. "Etwas aufgeben" literally and practically means: to "give up on something."

Now Nietzsche, in any commonsensical reading of the passages I've cited, is using the word *Aufgabe* in the first sense I've described: Kaufmann, on this level, is probably right to translate it as "task." And yet I would argue that Nietzsche's ears were too much attuned to the richness of his own language as to have ignored the resonances of those significations of the word that are suppressed in its translation and most straightforward interpretation. Going beyond such interpretations, I would want to argue that when Nietzsche uses the word *Aufgabe*, he is always somehow *aware* of the fact that the "task"

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becoming, desiring oneself unrestrictedly again and again […]." The "strong" overman, on the other hand, "[…] seeks to fixate his dominance in the will to return for all times"(pp. 120-121) . This allows Müller-Lauter to explain why Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence is a "contradiction [that] is not self-refuting" (p. 121).

also necessarily means "a giving up," an "abandonment" of something – that to strive for something one must always also be prepared to risk giving something up, and that whatever the task gives us to be, demands a renunciation of both what we were, and/or may have been.

This tension of the *Aufgabe* as a gift that will only be bestowed upon us at the cost of something we renounce, reaches its shivery summit in the most personal of all tasks: that of becoming what we are. For it is in this most personal experience of the task, in the sort of experience where *we ourselves* have become the subject and object of the task, that the stakes are highest. Here, to commit to the task literally means to give ourselves up and over to the task. To meet the challenge of becoming what we are, we must also be prepared to renounce to something, to give something up, and this "something" that the task (*Aufgabe*) asks us to give up, is precisely what we may be most hesitant to part with: ourselves.

This notion of identity as an *Aufgabe* is in tune with Nietzsche's general definition of the nature of life as self-overcoming:

> All great things bring about their own destruction through an act of self-overcoming: thus the law of life will have it, the law of the necessity of "self-overcoming" in the nature of life – the lawgiver himself eventually receives the call: "patere legem, quam ipse tulisti [submit to the law you yourself proposed].[515]

The notion of the self as an *Aufgabe* can be opposed to the notion of the self as an *Aufhebung*. If Nietzsche is right, then the dialecticians are wrong: we cannot cancel previous negative selves by having them clash with an image of a more positive self, thus forging in the smithy of the self an improved synthesis of a brand new shiny self. No, things aren't that easy. That the forging is an *Aufgabe* means that something has to be given up, indeed, but that which has to be given up, is precisely, what has been given to us. And it is this "what we have been given to be" that may be hardest to give up, yet must be given up in the *Aufgabe*. That life asks us to do just this, is what constitutes its biggest moral

[515] Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, section III-27. Cited from: Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals/Ecce Homo*, *op, cit.*, p. 161. German original: "Alle grossen Dinge gehen durch sich selbst zu Grunde, durch einen Akt der Selbstaufhebung: so will es das Gesetz des Lebens, das Gesetz der nothwendigen 'Selbstüberwindung' im Wesen des Lebens, — immer ergeht zuletzt an den Gesetzgeber selbst der Ruf: 'patere legem, quam ipse tulisti.' " (eKGWB).

challenge. To be forced to overcome what will eternally resist being overcome: that is the deepest conflict of the self, its ultimate confrontation, its never-ending task, indeed, its *Aufgabe*.

But Nietzsche would not have been the elusive thinker he was if he hadn't also shown awareness of the *limits* of this *Aufgabe* himself. An awareness testified for by, for example, the words of warning to his much-frowned-upon series of aphorisms on women in *Beyond Good and Evil*, concerning what he calls "the core," the "this is I" which man cannot avoid. In fact, it is the tension between the demands of the "giving-up" and what we could call (extending the application of an expression Nietzsche originally uses in a reflection on the relation between men and women) the "this is I" at the core of man, from which results one of the greatest challenges of the moral life as such: becoming what we are.

Eventually, this kind of challenge is *unavoidably met* by each and every one of us: we cannot escape the challenge of identity, we cannot hide from it. Not even the "mediocre" man can avoid it – the mediocre everyman, who molds and mushes his strongest passions and who seeks to enjoy life in dribs and drabs, who purports to tame passion and to bridle desire in order to avoid all suffering. One may say: our everyman does this out of fear: he fears to be overcome by life. One might say he is hiding from something. Nietzsche's Zarathustra clearly condemns such excessively moderate and humble everymen; the moderation of such a man, he will argue, is in reality a form of mediocrity.[516] But that would be unjust with regard to the everyman. To say that he is simply someone who cowardly excludes all risk from his life is to be blind to the overarching persistence of the challenge of life, of life as challenge. For the insurmountable risk this man, he too, takes, is that someday he might wake up and *realize* precisely that his everymanly composure was but a cloak for mediocrity. Thus the everyman actually takes the biggest risk of all – he risks everything for he is literally risking all of himself, all of the time.

One might go further and say that this makes him the riskiest person of all. For this man is not risking "what he is" (as the reckless adventurer does), no, even more than that: he is perpetually risking all the things he could be. The day the everyman wakes up

[516] See: Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra,* "On Virtue that makes small," section 2, *op. cit.*, p. 282.

realizing what he has been risking, is the day he realizes that this "what I could be" has turned into a "what I could have been" – his excessive moderation has turned upon him and now challenges him as mediocrity: what was once the ground beneath him (his moderation), has not been pulled away from beneath his feet, no, even worse: it has been stood on its head and now become the sky above him (one of those tauntingly bright skies he knows he cannot reach, for it has no horizon at its center, and its end will never be contained in vision). What position can one hope to take towards a sky that seems unreachable in its endlessness? One could either pray to it, or sit and watch in silence as the clouds, inexorably, pass over one's head.[517]

But such praying never really seems an option to Nietzsche.[518] And if he has Zarathustra taunt the man of mediocrity, the composed everyman, it is only to propel him into action again, to have him take up arms again. There is an aspect of relentlessness to Nietzsche: he is a philosopher who demands action. His philosophy is one of leaps and bounds. He is a philosopher of the task. A task from which there is no escaping, a challenge that has to be met, an *Aufgabe* for which one has to have the courage to give oneself up. Only if we are prepared to overcome ourselves in giving up what is closest to us, may we hope to receive the gift of what seems furthest from us. To give ourselves up in order not to give up on ourselves, that is the long and hard paradoxical task for which Nietzsche tries to prepare his readers. And again: the demands of this task are placed upon all of us. For the everyman to think or feel he will not have to deal with the remote loftiness of such tasks, would be to err unequivocally; at some point the *Aufgabe* will catch up with him too. The heft of its unavoidable questions will firmly press down on his existence until he answers them: "what is it that you have become, what is that you could have been?" And not before

[517] Nietzsche's assessment of the concept of moderation remains ambiguous throughout his works. Cf. Paul Franco's brief analysis of the problematic in: *Nietzsche's Enlightenment: The Free-Spirit Trilogy of the Middle Period*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014, pp. 34-35. Franco finishes his section on the problematic with a citation from *The Will to Power* that perhaps expresses the ambiguity of the problem best: "*In Summa: domination* of the passions, *not* their weakening or extirpation!" (Franco, *op. cit.*, p. 35). To further clarify my remarks about the "mediocre man," it may be added that in the example above, the moderation of the mediocre man is precisely of the nature of a "weakening" or "extirpation" of the passions – whereas Nietzsche's more positive appraisals of moderation seem to center for the most part not on such a "weakening" or "extirpation," but on a "*domination* of the passions." For a more detailed analysis and evaluation of Nietzsche's use of the concepts of measure, moderation, proportion and temperance, see: Van Tongeren, Paul. "Nietzsche's Greek Measure." In: *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, vol. 24, fall 2002, pp. 5- 24.
[518] Cf. for example Zarathustra's dismissive remarks about those who are still inclined to create worlds before which they can kneel. Nietzche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

he has replied in a way that allows him to reconcile the answer to the first question with the answer to the second question will he be able to start to successfully carry the weight of his identity as *Aufgabe*.

The fact that Nietzsche seems to have believed that this is a task which could be realized by future men must make of him one of the staunchest optimists in the history of philosophy. But as I have tried to point out every now and then, Nietzsche wasn't entirely blind to the possibility that the task he imposes upon us would sometimes make us dizzy with despair. Why? Because the demands of creativity are liable at some point to clash with the ultimacy and irreversibility of the will to power. If one accepts creativity as an absolutely decisive criterion for value, one must also accept the consequence that the failure of creativity entails an absolute loss of value. And if the self is to be subjected to these criterions of valuation too, then the failure of creativity entails the failure of self.[519]

Another way of expressing what I believe to be the central tension of Nietzsche's philosophy is to say that ultimately, value is decided by what can be thought of as a relation between resolutions. When we speak of resolutions, we usually think of them as the outcomes of decisions. A person who is "resolute" is a person who has the gift of making firm decisions, who knows (or believes she knows) how and when to decide. A resolution expresses the firm determination of a decision. The first four senses a standard English dictionary[520] lists under the header "resolution" are all in some way tied up to the notions of determination, decision, and firmness (the fourth one even has: "firmness of purpose;

[519] A brief adventitious note. Nietzsche is not only the most optimistic of philosophers, he is also the most dangerous of philosophers. Reading him often feels like playing a game of cards at the casino – at first, one is lured in by the overall charm of the ambiance; card-dealer Nietzsche lures us in with his exceptionally well-polished prose, no worries, he seems to say, the drinks are on me and all I am offering is a night of good old-fashioned fun – let us just play for a bit, you and I. We take it all in: the warmth of Friedrich's atmosphere, the refreshment of Nietzsche's wine, the playfulness of the master's game. But then, slowly, without our even noticing it, the stakes are being raised a little, and raised some more, until all of a sudden – have we sipped too eagerly on this wine? Did we get carried away by the game? – the warmth has turned into heat, the drinks are starting to taste bitter, and the game has become a serious affair. We are now starting to sweat, for we have just discovered that our pockets are empty and all that we possess is on the table; we are all in. Dealer Nietzsche is smiling, for he has us exactly where he wanted us; he has laid out the cards, we have laid out ourselves. We are staring anxiously at the cards on the table, but he is comfortably looking up at us, and smiling: "All in, eh? – So this is what you are *worth*? Well, well, well, how interesting, how very interesting." A slow tapping of fingers and another quick smile – it only confirms what we already knew: this is it, we are all in, what has started as a game has become a question of all or nothing. (A consolation: Nietzsche is the kind of dealer who isn't simply risking the chips of the house: he is every bit as invested in this game as we are, and for him too, everything is riding on the outcome.)

[520] Random House Dictionary, 2015.

the mental state or quality of being resolved or resolute"). The fifth definition of the word however ("the act or process of separating into constituent or elementary parts"), shows an interesting sensibility to the Latin etymology of the word, which hints at a breaking up into parts, the dissolving of something solid. In Latin, the word "resolvere" means "to unfasten" or to "loosen." So there seems to be a strange ambiguity hidden at the core of our notion of resolution: on the one hand it expresses an abundance of firmness, of solidity, on the other, its origin shows it to be unmistakably imbibed by a potential porosity. I would suggest that it is precisely this ambiguity that speaks through the etymology of the word "resolution" by which the self that conceives of itself as "resolved" or "determined"[521] is haunted.

The resolved self seeks to be firm, to be master of itself, to be self-sufficient, to will its will – this is its resolution, its capability of acting resolutely, of being a resolute self. But in this resolution, the self eventually will have to discover itself as a *resolution*, as something that, in its core, is looseness, unfastened fragility, and vulnerable selfhood. The solid self may be absolutely resolute about the sort of self it wants to create for itself, about who and what it aims to be – but this resolution inevitably also implies the risk of an unfastening, an unloosening, a disintegration of the self, or, more precisely, a resolution of the self. That Nietzsche, in spite of his often grandiloquent rhetoric of power and creativity, often shows awareness of this, the self's most *resolute risk*, is what I've tried to show through my analysis of what he conceived to be "his task," or, better, his *Aufgabe*. The biggest potential threat for the realization of ourselves as tasks or *Aufgabe*n, the reason our resolutions are liable to end *as and in resolutions* (that is, *fail to be realized*), is that reality, as that with which the self is constantly confronted *also* has a particular kind of resolution.

On the one hand, there is a rigidity to reality that makes that reality often appears to us as "something we have to deal with." Reality is what it is, it comes to us as it comes, and

[521] Interestingly enough, the word "determined," in its use as an equivalent for "resolved," is characterized by a similar ambiguity at its very core. "To be determined" to do or become something means to be firmly resolved to reach one's goal, to be prepared to go through great lengths in order to realize what one set out to realize. At the same time, there is a duality to the very word "determination" that reminds us of the fact that notwithstanding our resolvedness, notwithstanding the amount of effort we are willing to put in to realize something, our being itself is *determined* in ways we don't necessarily control. This second, heteronomous sense of the word "determined" breaks through, paradoxically, right at those moments when the autonomous dimension of our determination starts to fade and falter. When we have come to the end of our determination, when our perseverance is confronted with its limits, we start to feel the imposition of what it is we have been determined to be. This second sense of "determination" shines through most conspicuously in our day to day use of the philosophical concept of "determinism."

as such, we can either "undergo" it, or "confront" it. To confront it, is to put the richness of *our* resolutions in front of the rigidity of *its* resolution. This confrontation carries with it a risk: all this may resolve into nothing, we may turn out to be insufficient – but that is part of the game, that is what it means to meet the challenge(s) of becoming what we are: taking the risk to give up at least something, perhaps everything, in order to become that which we know not the last implications of. There are no empty spaces in between the self as resolution and the resolution of reality – the relation between these resolutions is absolute, is effectuated in a sphere where "everything is related." What remains after we have taken the risk is what we call identity. The self, then, to be precise, is never simply the result of a resolution, but the (dynamic) result of a relation between resolutions (i.e., the resolution of the self, and the resolution of reality).

It might be asked here: if we conceive of the self as the result of a relation, what remains of the original vitality of the sort of creative confrontation Nietzsche and/or his Zarathustra exhorted us to? The tension in his philosophy between autonomous creation and heteronomous determination still has not been dissolved, but then again, it has not been my intention to dissolve it. Instead, I have tried to show how this tension can be thought of as more fundamentally part of the concept of identity itself. Can Nietzsche really be brought around to such a conception of the self? Maybe, maybe not. But there seems to be a more important question related to this tension.

Beyond the question concerning the possible sublation of the tension between the will to autonomous self-creation and what is heteronomously other to this will, the question of how we should position ourselves towards this tension presents itself. Nietzsche offers us a concrete image of what successful self-creation looks like, referring us to Goethe as someone who "disciplined himself into wholeness," who "created himself." He indicates that "Such a spirit who has *become free* stands amid the cosmos with a joyous and trusting fatalism, in the *faith* that only the particular is loathsome, and that all is redeemed and affirmed in the whole – *he does not negate anymore*. Such a faith, however, is the highest of all possible faiths: I have baptized it with the name of Dionysus."[522] Similarly, Nietzsche speaks, in *The Antichrist*, of his imagined race of hyperboreans, with their "will to

[522] See: Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, IX-49 (transl. Kaufmann). In: *The Portable Nietzsche*, *op. cit.*, p. 554.

the economy of the great style: keeping our strength, our enthusiasm in harness. Reverence for oneself; love of oneself; unconditional freedom before oneself."[523].I take these to be two of the examples or descriptions Nietzsche offers of instances where the tension between autonomy and heteronomy, in all its complexity, has somehow been overcome.

But as opposed to *these* hyperboreans, the image of *another* hyperborean may still be on the back of our mind; the image of a spirit who has strayed perhaps even further up North, far beyond Nietzsche's north perhaps. For the tragic *failure* to attune successfully (in one way or another) to the tension discussed above seems to have a face too. It is to the lineaments of this face, Kinbote's face, that I wish to turn at present.

7.3. The Return of King Kinbote

That we are beings who are endowed with the creativity to become who we are comes at a metaphysical cost. The openness that generously allows for such becoming, is the same openness in which we may (have to) lose ourselves. The reason I turned to Nietzsche is that I wanted to show that identity, creatively conceived of, always involves a risk. Those who end up "disciplining themselves into wholeness" may end up looking back at this risk as "a thrill," a tension that's part of the game. But then there are also those who lose themselves in the game. In the following sections, I want to argue that Kinbote is such a loser, but a very noble loser nonetheless.

Recall Kinbote's problematic. Recall it in the terms resulting from our discussion of Nietzsche above: here is a man who has lost most of what defined him as a human being (his past, his country), and who has never been able to create a successful relation between the smooth seducer he wanted to be, and the suppressed homosexual his surroundings have forced him to be; reality resisted his will. But Kinbote will not desist from the quest of becoming what he thinks he can be just yet. Close to despair, he makes one last bold resolution: "if this reality does not give me what I want – well then, I will create my own reality." Because the limits of his creative forces do not permit him to create an epic poem himself, he will avail himself of someone else's poem; but in it, he finds the strength to read

[523] Nietzsche, *The Antichrist* (transl. Kaufmann). In: *The Portable Nietzsche*, *op. cit.*, p. 569.

his own inventions, and with the yarn of this poem, he manages to weave a fiction of his own: Zembla. In the world of this fiction, he finally shapes himself into what reality did not allow him to be: Zembla is Kinbote's triumph over the rigidity of reality. His way of establishing an equilibrium amidst the relation between the two resolutions mentioned above – the resolution of the self, and the resolution of the real.

The question we found ourselves asking earlier was: if this creation allowed Kinbote to refrain from lapsing into madness, if this creation is what kept him from succumbing to a reality that seemed hostile towards him, could we then be tempted into concluding that it had some sort of moral value, that Kinbote's actions can be morally justified? There are, I think, two kinds of answers to this question from a Nietzschean moral perspective.

The easiest way to get rid of the question real fast is to simply say that Nietzschean morality would condemn this "Zembla" as a creation resulting from a form of *ressentiment* – that as such, it has as little value as the *Hinterwelterei* of the Christian, and that we should think of Kinbote as a wily but ultimately weak escape-artist. This possible answer has the tempting benefit that it can be aligned with the fact that Kinbote (as the reader is often reminded of) is a devout Christian himself. And yet I think we shouldn't succumb to this answer. For it is wholly blind to the fact that Zembla is in no way connected to Kinbote's Christianity. To say that Kinbote's Zembla should be conceived of as a creation out of sheer *ressentiment* doesn't seem to do full justice to the sheer joy and life-affirming pleasure that speaks out of his Zemblan world. Maybe *ressentiment* can be made to account for some of the explanation here, but even if it could, it wouldn't give us the whole story.

The second possible answer is to argue that beyond the tension between *ressentiment* and overman-like creativity, there is an even deeper tension in Nietzsche's work, the one that I've tried to work out above, and which consists in the tension between the potencies of creativity and the dynamic determinacy of the world as given. If one agrees to frame the discussion in these terms, then the question concerning the moral judgment we are to cast on Kinbote's reinvention of himself as the King of Zembla becomes more intricate, and more interesting. The moral value of the creation then comes to depend on the tenability of the creation as creation.

Kinbote's creation ultimately reveals to be a failure. The reason it fails is not because it is a creation out of *ressentiment* or that it is inauthentic, not because his creation *lacks*

something, but because his creation is *too successful*. Kinbote's Zembla constitutes a world where he can reign, where he can be the sort of fully autonomous self which is a law unto itself, in short, where he is king. Zembla is what allows him to ward off madness for at least a few precious months, what allows him to be the sort of person he wanted to be. But once Kinbote has finished his creative work, the fiction must end too; the kingdom of Zembla must crumble, and Kinbote must either relapse into his initial despair, or manage to rekindle his creative urge. But this is a generosity not bestowed upon Kinbote: suicide follows.[524]

In the end, Zembla, as a fiction, has become so much of a creation, that Kinbote is unable to bridge the distance between the self he has created and the self he has been given to be. He has become, quite literally, what another philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, would have called a "king without a country." The king without a country is one of the metaphors Kierkegaard uses for what he thinks of as "the active despairing self." The active despairing self is a self that has lost itself and thinks that all it takes to recover its self, is to take an experimental stance towards itself – to be self-creative and persevere in this creativity, to become master again over itself, and recreate itself according to its own needs, plans, dreams, and wishes. These are Kierkegaard's own words:

> The self is its own master, absolutely (as one says) its own master; and exactly this is the despair, but also what it regards as its pleasure and joy. But it is easy on closer examination to see that this absolute ruler is a king without a country, that really he rules over nothing; his position, his kingdom, his sovereignty, are subject to the dialectic that rebellion is legitimate at any moment. Ultimately it is arbitrarily based upon the self itself. Consequently, the despairing self is forever building only castles

[524] Kinbote's suicide, which does not *actually* occur *in the text*, is still a debated issue amongst Nabokovians. Nabokov himself was relatively clear about it in an interview: "I think it is so nice that the day on which Kinbote committed suicide (and he certainly did after putting the last touches to his edition of the poem) happens to be both the anniversary of Pushkin's *Lyceum* and that of 'poor old man Swift' 's death, which is news to me (but see variant in note to line 231)." (*Strong Opinions*, pp. 74-75.) Michael Wood deems this to be a case of "authorial trespassing," and argues we don't have to pay attention to it in our reading of *Pale Fire*'s narrative, and that is a valid argument (Wood, *The Magician's Doubts*, *op. cit.*, p. 186, cf. also p. 203). However, in addition to the author's own affirmations, textual arguments for Kinbote's suicide can also be advanced – and this has been done convincingly by Brian Boyd. (*Magic of Artistic Discovery*, *op. cit.*, pp. 102-106.) Boyd also argues, convincingly I think, that the kind of certainty concerning Kinbote's suicide Wood demands of *Pale Fire*'s narrative can never be yielded by the narrative as it is: this would demand a different kind of narrator, and a different kind of narration. I would add that the narrator from Nabokov's last completed novel pithily summarizes this last component of Boyd's argument *contra* Wood, when he remarks that: "The I of the book / cannot die in the book."(See: *Look at the Harlequins,* p. 737.)

> in the air, and is always only fencing with an imaginary opponent. All these experimental virtues look very splendid; they fascinate for a moment, like oriental poetry; such self-discipline, such imperturbability, such ataraxy, etc. border almost on the fabulous. Yes, that they do for sure, and beneath it all there is nothing.. The self wants in its despair to savor to the full the satisfaction of turning itself into itself, of developing itself, of being itself; it wants to take credit for this fictional, masterly project, its own way of understanding itself. And yet what it understands itself to be is in the final instance a riddle; just when it seems on the point of having the building finished, at a whim it can dissolve the whole thing into nothing.[525]

Kinbote reminds us of the fragility the task (*Aufgabe*) of identity imposes upon us. His character tragically lays bare the porosity that is at the heart of our resolutions. That the process of self-creation may eventually result in a Kierkegaardian king without a country, that our resolutions may eventually revenge themselves upon us, that in the process of self-creation one might accidentally come to give up something that cannot be recovered, something that is irrevocably lost and that the self absolutely does not allow to be lost – in short, that creativity may result in a "Kinbote" – that is perhaps one of the harshest conclusions we may have to draw from Nabokov's *Pale Fire*.

Does that mean we are to conclude that *Pale Fire*'s Kinbote failed to live up to the ultimate demands of creativity? That he was not a true creative individual, but merely *posing* as one? This is one possible conclusion, but it has the notable disadvantage of being particularly hard to establish. For what are the criteria, anyway, upon which we are to distinguish between the true creative genius and the marauding sort of talent that only ever manages to appear as such? To intend to answer this question would lead us out of the domain of ethics and into the domain of aesthetics. But we are still concerned with the moral evaluation of the person who gathers up the courage to reshape himself and his position in the world through some sort of creative project, in and through which he may be transformed, but, ultimately, falls short of the demands of the project of self-creation as a whole.

We saw that one possible explanation for such failure can be provided for by Kierkegaard's metaphor of the king without a country. Applied to the case of Kinbote, we

[525] Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Sickness unto Death* (transl. Alastair Hannay),part 1, section C, "The forms of this Sickness." London: Penguin Classics, 1989, pp. 99-100.

could say something like: this is someone who has managed to create a very pleasing image of himself, but, by feeding into this image nothing but personal desiderata, then isolating this image from all that is other to it. If the person who has reached creative autonomy in this way would manage to sustain the distance he has created between the self it has created and what is other to it, there would possibly never be a problem at all. But if the self is ultimately to be thought of as a *relation*, then the confrontation between the self and what is other to it must at some point inevitably present itself. And when it comes, this confrontation, it takes very little (in fact only "a whim") for this autonomous self to crumble. The slightest touch of heteronomy may then suffice for the collapse of the entire project of autonomy. The self that only shapes itself according to those laws that have come from itself, if it is a human being, must at some point grow saturated with itself – and it is precisely at this point, when it makes an attempt to reach out beyond itself, that the risk of collapse presents itself.

Tragically enough, the proportions of this sort of risk seem to augment with the degree to which the self has invested itself in the project of itself as creation. And it is perhaps only to be expected that someone like Kinbote, when the moment of confrontation eventually presents itself, sees no other way out than suicide. The equilibrium he has established in the tension between the resolution of the self and the resolution of the real turns out to be lopsided – this asymmetric self is bound to slide off into the darkness of the evil other, its over-enthusiastic "yes" at last silenced by an unforgiving "no." In Kinbote's case, the face of this evil other is death. But we must not forget that he came upon this evil other as a result of an attempt to escape the evil other of madness. This is Kinbote's tragedy: his pursuit of autonomy helps him to stave off one evil form of heteronomy, but steadily leads him into an even more evil form of heteronomy, this time the ultimate form of evil and heteronomy: death.

At this point we may stop and wonder: if such, apparently, are the *risks* of conceiving of the task of becoming what we are in terms of a project of creativity, then why on earth should we, indeed, conceive of the self as something that is to be created? Is not this folly? Does it not inevitably lead to folly? Or are we to conclude that all this only goes to prove that when it comes to the self as a project of creativity, we should be careful not to *overdo* things, not to become *too* invested in one's striving for autonomous selfhood, lest in the

course of our creative attempts at becoming what we are we turn ourselves into what we do not, on any occasion, wish to become: a faint fiction, a mere shadow of what we thought we could or should be?

In the last section of this chapter, I want to investigate into the subtle tension that arises when the self is conceived of as a project of creativity. To find out *where* and *when* exactly this tension arises, and what exactly its moral importance is, I want to focus on one specific scene in *Pale Fire*, the scene where the relationship between King Kinbote and his queen, Disa, is explored.

7.4. Dreams and Demons: King Kinbote and Queen Disa

Like most kings, Kinbote, despite his homosexuality, has a queen. Named after a Scandinavian heroine from medieval times known for her wisdom, Queen Disa's role in *Pale Fire* is curiously ambiguous. Given Kinbote's unquestionable homosexuality and predilection for the company of males, one might expect that every relationship between him and women within the confines of the kingdom of Zembla might strike us as either unfortunately comic or pathetically anomalic. And in most of the accounts we are given of Kinbote's interactions with women, a combination of these feelings seems to prevail, at least in Kinbote himself. But with regard to Queen Disa, there is an interesting scene that eludes the lightness of comedy. Boyd, in juxtaposition to the "pattern" of "the King walking away from women" that "underlies much of the comedy of the Zembla scenes," marks this scene in terms of "an unexpected late wave of pathos," and, referring to a dream of Kinbote's that is central to the scene, Boyd is struck by "a sense of some deeper emotional and moral reality trying to break through."[526] And indeed, the tone and the atmosphere here do seem to be distinctly different from almost all of the rest of Kinbote's commentary. Kinbote's habitual tone of banter, his light-hearted frivolity of spirit are for the nonce replaced by a heightened sense of seriousness, as if all of a sudden Kinbote realizes the *importance* of something during this scene.

[526] Boyd, *Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

The scene is laid at Queen Disa's villa on the French Riviera. The exiled king, *en route* to his final destination in America, is paying a visit to Disa in order to discuss some "business matters." But the description we are given of this meeting is not just a description of *this* meeting. Subtly interwoven with the description of the present meeting are moments from past meetings and images of dreams related to these meetings. This makes that the whole scene, as it is narrated by Kinbote, is pervaded by a mysterious chronological dynamicity – the reality of *this* meeting is not just simply the series of the events that take place over its course, but somehow *more* than the sum of these events. Thus Nabokov stresses again, by means of a stratagem we already saw him use in *Bend Sinister*, *Pnin*, and *Transparent Things*, that from the point of view of consciousness, there is always necessarily a larger complexity to the reality of what is going on than a simple description of the present events that make up what it is that is going on can convey. In order to convey that part of the complexity of the event which results from its being an event that is taken up in the teleological continuity of a conscience that experiences these events, Nabokov chooses to create a dynamic texture interblending that which *goes on in* the scene (the events on stage), and the *ongoing* concerns of the conscience that lives *through* the scene.

In Kinbote's case, this results in a remarkable tension, as his experience of the meeting with Queen Disa is constantly hemmed in between remorseful recollections of a series of interconnected moments that make up his history of hurting Disa (from not being able to consume his marriage with her, to her discoveries of his many escapades with male partners, to his confession of not loving her) on the one hand, and the returning image of a dream-version of himself that manages to make amends for all this on the other hand. A closer look at the flow of Kinbote's thought reminds us:

> What had the sentiments he entertained in regard to Disa ever amounted to? Friendly indifference and bleak respect. Not even in the first bloom of their marriage had he felt any tenderness or any excitement. Of pity, of heartache, there could be no question. He was, had always been, casual and heartless. But the heart of his dreaming self, both before and after the rupture, made extraordinary amends.[527]

[527] *Pale Fire*, p. 589.

This "dreaming self" has thoughts and feelings that are wholly different from the "surface-life feelings"[528] Kinbote experiences in waking life:

> […] worries in no way connected to her assumed her image in the subliminal world as a battle or a reform becomes a bird of wonder in a tale for children. These heart-rending dreams transformed the drab prose of his feelings for her into strong and strange poetry, subsiding undulations of which would flash and disturb him throughout the day, bringing back the pang and the richness – and then only the pang, and then only its glancing reflection – but not affecting at all his attitude towards the real Disa.[529]

The most remorseful of these dreams repeats Kinbote's "confession" that he does not love Disa. About this dream Kinbote says:

> The gist, rather than the actual plot of the dream, was a constant refutation of his not loving her. His dream-love for her exceeded in emotional tone, in spiritual passion and depth, anything he had experienced in his surface existence. This love was like an endless wringing of hands, like a blundering of the soul through an infinite maze of hopelessness and remorse. They were, in a sense, amorous dreams, for they were permeated with tenderness, with a longing to sink his head onto her lap and sob away the monstrous past. They brimmed with the awful awareness of her being so young and so helpless. They were purer than his life.[530]

There is a purity, or even a tenderness to the experience of this idealized dream self that is hopelessly lacking in Kinbote's actual, waking-life self. In this context, one moment from the whole scene can be singled out as particularly interesting from a moral point of view. It occurs towards the end of the scene, or actually, even after the main action of the scene has already been properly finished. As Kinbote is walking away toward the gate of the garden of Disa's villa, he turns around and looks, from a distance, at what he (mistakenly) distinguishes as Disa's "white figure," and has a strange experience: "[…] suddenly a fragile bridge was suspended between waking indifference and dream-love […]." As the "white

[528] *Ibid.*
[529] *Ibid.*
[530] *Pale Fire*, p. 590.

figure" comes into movement however, he discovers that the person he was looking at was not Disa, but someone else.

What captures my attention here, are two things. First, there is something in the "whiteness" of the figure Kinbote mistakenly identifies as Disa's that reminds us of another situation of mistaken identification, one that occurs in John Shade's poem. When Shade is describing his near-death experience connected to a stroke he suffers during a lecture, he chants: "everything I loved was lost / But no aorta could report regret […] And dreadfully distinct / Against the dark, a tall white fountain played." The vision of this white fountain keeps haunting him, and when, somewhat later, he reads a newspaper story about an old lady who has purportedly had the same vision during a similar experience, he decides to visit the lady. The visit turns out to be a disappointment (the old lady being somewhat *too* interested in Shade's status of "famous poet") from the very moment Shade enters the lady's home: (he) "Saw that blue hair, those freckled hands, that rapt / Orchideous air – and knew that I was trapped." After that, when Shade contacts the author of the newspaper article in question to see if this person might teach him some more about the whole affair, he is told that: "There's one misprint – not that it matters much / *Mountain*, not *fountain*. The majestic touch." Shade, somewhat shaken, exclaims:

> Life Everlasting – based on a misprint!
> I mused as I drove homeward: take the hint.
> And stop investigating my abyss?
> But all at once it dawned on me that *this*
> Was the real point, the contrapuntal theme;
> Just this: not text, but texture; not the dream
> But topsy-turvical coincidence,
> Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense.
> Yes! It sufficed that I in life could find
> Some kind of link-and-boblink, some kind
> Of correlated pattern in the game,
> Plexed artistry, and something of the same
> Pleasure in it as they who played it found.[531]

[531] *Pale Fire*, pp. 579-580.

Shade thought he was about to elucidate the mystery, or at least part of the mystery of the meaning of the white fountain. When visiting the old lady who he thinks can provide him with this knowledge, it turns out all has been a misunderstanding, the lady's authority proves to be questionable, and what's more, her vision turns out to have been subtly but completely different. And yet, it is precisely from this *misidentification* that Shade arrives at the truth he was after, finds the answer that helps him find his way out of what he calls "his abyss." The truth he was after has been revealed to him "contrapuntally."

I would argue that there is both a textual and a textural link between the moment in Kinbote's commentary where he mistakenly identifies the "white figure" as Queen Disa, and the moment where Shade, through mistaken identification of his fountain with the old lady's mountain, gets a glimpse of what for him is "the real point, the contrapuntal theme," a glimpse of the ultimate truth of the way things are related to one another in life. One might feel this is somewhat of a stretch, that I'm making too much of the coincidence of the recurring whiteness. But there is yet another hint that points to the connection of Kinbote's misidentification and the series of misidentifications that make up the episode concerning Shade's "investigation" into his "abyss." Recall Shade entering the old lady's home: one of the things he casually remarks upon is "the rapt Orchideous air." Now, the adjective "orchideous" is definitely not a common adjective people use to describe "air" or smells. Why does Nabokov have Shade use it here, in this context? The answer neatly presents itself to us once we remember that the name "Disa" is not just, as already indicated at the beginning of this section, historically linked to the name of a medieval Scandinavian queen, but also used by botanists to refer to a specific genus of orchid.[532]

[532] Coincidentally, the Disa orchid seems to have had a reputation for its susceptibility to be mistaken for other orchids. Thus Frederick Boyle, a British author and orchid-lover from Stoke-on-Trent, relates an interesting story of misprision related to Disa orchids in *About Orchids. A Chat* (London: Chapman, 1893, pp. 165-166). I cite the whole passage here, not only because Boyle's style is so beautifully entertaining, but also because a faint echo of Kinbote's own voice may be discovered in it: "The 'Butterfly orchid' is so familiar that I do not pause to describe it. But imagine that most interesting flower all blue, instead of gold and brown! I have never been able to learn what was the foundation of the old belief in such a marvel. But the great Lindley went to his grave in unshaken confidence that a blue *papilio* exists. Once he thought he had a specimen; but it flowered, and his triumph had to be postponed. I myself heard of it two years back, and tried to cherish a belief that the news was true. A friend from Natal assured me that he had seen one on the table of the Director of the Gardens at Durban; but it proved to be one of those terrestrial orchids, so lovely and so tantalizing to us, with which South Africa abounds. Very slowly do we lengthen the catalogue of them in our houses. There are gardeners, such as Mr. Cook at Loughborough, who grow *Disa grandiflora* like a weed. Mr. Watson of Kew demonstrated that *Disa racemosa* will flourish under conditions easily secured. I had the good fortune to do

And indeed, when one rereads the Queen Disa scene again, it turns out to contain a reference to precisely this etymology of Queen Disa's name at the moment where Kinbote, whilst at Disa's villa, feels a quick shiver of seduction upon the entrance of two young men: "Two footmen, handsome young strangers of a marked Latin type, appeared with the tea and caught Fleur in mid-curtsey. A sudden breeze groped among the glycines. Defiler of flowers. He asked Fleur as she turned to go with the *Disa* orchids if she still played the viola."[533]

Thus – and this is the second point that can be made with regard to the line concerning "the fragile bridge […] suspended between waking indifference and dream-love" – if the episode of Kinbote's fleeting fragility seems intricately related to the episode where Shade has what can be qualified as his contrapuntal epiphany, we might perhaps argue that some of the same revelatory importance is to be attached to the Kinbote-Disa scene, and especially to the moment of misrecognition we singled out above. Shade discovers a truth that synthesizes his life *contrapuntally* through a series of misidentifications; Kinbote, at a similar contrapuntal moment of misidentification, experiences what can be thought of as the truth concerning the whole of his moral predicament: the intimation of something that could serve to bridge *his* "abyss," the one between the two selves that he has been describing to us all over the course of this fragment, characterized by two modes of being that are here summarized as "waking indifference" on the one hand, and "dream-love" on the other. For a moment, if only for a moment, Kinbote has an intimation of a possible synthesis between these two selves. For a moment, he catches a glimpse of the sort of ideal world in which he *would* have been able to *both* satisfactorily fulfill his role as Disa's husband *and* do justice to the homosexual cravings that make up the other part of his being. The vision of a contrapuntal synthesis, in which the opposites are neither sublated nor cancelled out, but reunited *dis*harmoniously, in a paradoxical asymmetric equilibrium of opposites.

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as much for *Disa Cooperi*, though not by my own skill. One supreme little triumph is mine, however. In very early days, when animated with the courage of utter ignorance, I bought eight bulbs of *Disa discolor*, and flowered them, every one! No mortal in Europe had done it before, nor has any tried since, I charitably hope, for a more rubbishing bloom does not exist. But there it was—*Ego feci*! And the specimen in the Herbarium at Kew bears my name."

[533] *Pale Fire*, p. 592.

In the rationale of *this* world, unfortunately, this *both/and* scenario just cannot exist; even in Kinbote's fictionalized account of it, such moral scenarios present themselves as an either/or. According to the rationale of this world, Kinbote must either satisfy his homosexual cravings, or make Disa happy. Yet, be that as it may, at times an intimation presents itself to us, a subtle inkling that indicates there is something *in between* the "either" and the "or"; and it is precisely the clair-obscur whisper of such a "between" that reaches Kinbote's half-dreaming, half-awake ear in the form of the "fragile bridge" that is "suspended" between the two self-images that have presented themselves to his mind. In the haze of a fleeting moment, Kinbote perceives the fragile bridge that would allow him to cover his personal abyss. And even though, given who and what he is, it is highly uncertain he will ever be able to tread the surface of this bridge, the contrapuntal importance with which not just this bridge, but all of the Kinbote-Disa scene is infused, expresses what can be thought of as one of the main moral truths of *Pale Fire* as a whole.

Those who try to build their cases concerning the moral condemnation of Kinbote around a predetermined set of moral laws or precepts are looking in and from the wrong direction. Certainly, convincing reasons can be provided for moral condemnations of Kinbote's stalking of his neighbor Shade, for his pathological lying, for the way he goes about his sexual relationships with a host of young boys, for his infidelity to Disa, and for his inattentiveness to the suffering of others. As mentioned in the first section of this chapter, however, this attitude fails to go to the moral core of the issue. The truth concerning morality that can be discerned from the scene we have just read is this: any balanced moral judgment one wishes to make about Kinbote must first and last of all consist in an evaluation and a valuation of the way Kinbote chooses to occupy the moment that falls between the "either" and the "or," the subtle interval between "that which we are" and "that which we might (have) be(en)."

This means we cannot solve the moral issue of *Pale Fire* by simply stating that Kinbote should have worked harder at realizing some version of the both/and scenario. On the contrary, it is clear that this both/and scenario is the gift that Kinbote cannot give to himself, the sort of self he cannot will himself to be, notwithstanding the creative forces he might invest into bringing about such a self. To demand this of Kinbote would amount to a neglect of the fact that there is, as indicated before, a resolute core of the self that the self

cannot transcend or "unwill," regardless of the rigidity of its resolutions.[534] Our resolutions are grounded in a porosity that lies at the heart of the self, the porosity of our resolutions is not just one of their characteristics; this porosity is what we are – for better or worse. And yet: although there is an undeniability to the rigidity of this fact, the danger to be avoided, of course, is to get carried away by these thoughts and make *too much* of this "resolute (i.e., porous *and* unovercomable) core" of the self, for that would inevitably put us at the mercy of the thorny vocabulary of (some variant of) determinism.

The bridge Kinbote briefly envisions, the fragile realm that covers the distance or interval between the ideal and its realization, the self one is and the self one might have been, *this* is, precisely, I would argue, the domain of morality. To find oneself in this middle space that is doubly determined, both by the reality of what we are, and by the ideality of that which we (either consciously or subconsciously) wish we were, means to find oneself to be confronted with a choice that is both less and more than a choice. The I that finds itself hemmed in between the dialectic of opposing selves may not be responsible for the kind of tension it is subjected to, and it may take a very complex series of calculations and weighing of predetermined moral values to establish any kind of argument that wishes either to condemn or laud *any* possible decision the self comes up with to transcend the kind of tension it is subjected to in this position. Kinbote catches a fleeting glimpse of what it is that forms the doubly determined middle ground in which the moral value of the self must ultimately be rooted. But at the same time, the scene we discussed gives us an indication of the fragility of this middle ground: the moment upon which the greatest moral weight rests, is what proves to be the most fragile, fleeting moment.

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[534] Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem *Ulysses* provides a very neat image of this paradoxical "core" of the self. Ulysses in old age, is witnessed musing with superior resignation:

> "[…] that which we are, we are;
> One equal temper of heroic hearts,
> Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
> To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

The tension between "that which we are, we are" on the one hand, and the firm will "to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield" on the other, expresses very precisely (though somewhat grandiloquently) the ambiguity at the heart of the resolutions that make us what we are. The rigidity of our resolutions opens us up to the potencies of what we might become – the resolution of the reality of what we are introduces a vulnerability that puts the limits to this potency. "Not to yield" *in spite of* "that which we are" seems to be Ulysses' final cry – one that could probably have counted on a nod of approval by Nietzsche's Zarathustra.

The highest criteria of moral value, like the most distant stars, are the ones we perceive with the greatest difficulty. "One must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star" is perhaps one of Nietzsche's (or Zarahustra's) most famous and widely quoted lines.[535] What this line fails to specify though, is how, once this dancing star has been created, we are to bridge the distance from ourselves to this star. Do we snatch the star from the heavens and bring it down to earth? Or are we to dance ourselves upward to the celestial sphere of the stars? In other words: how are we to actually cover the distance from the dark chaos of that which we are, to the bright ideality of that which we might be?

We should guard ourselves from equating morality either with the side of the ideal, and interpret this ideality in its turn as having transcendental forces of a grounding nature, or, to equate morality with some sort of "reality" that is supposed to guide and explain whatever it is that we *can* and thus *should* do. It makes a lot more sense to choose instead to focus on that which determines the distance or interval between these two poles. It is this distance, the distance between the sinner and his sin (to use a religious metaphor), the distance between the moral law and adherence to it, between the thought and the act, the distance between the various ideals we may come up with to give shape and direction to reality and this reality itself – it is this "distance between" that constitutes the realm where moral value is decided. From such a conception of moral value, the only sort of self that can be judged a definite failure, is the self that refuses to *cover any distance at all*, the self that refuses to stand in the moment of decision at any point, the disinterested or skeptical self that refuses to reflect upon the tension between what it is and what it might be at all. Such automated disinterest or thoughtless skepticism does not apply to Kinbote.[536] Kinbote, as I have repeatedly tried to show above, is well aware of what is at stake. He takes his chances. He puts all his stakes on creation. Unfortunately, it turned out to be the wrong bet.

What results is a failure of the self to come to terms with itself – a failure that is not necessarily of a moral nature, but should be conceived of, first and foremost, as a tragic

[535] Quite recently, it has even served as the redemptive motto for a serial killer in a contemporary television-series (*The Fall,* BBC/ITV, 2013).
[536] In *Pale Fire*, this is the sort of self represented by murderer Gradus, who "morally, is a dummy pursuing another dummy" (*Pale Fire*, p. 639), and who is described as "an automatic man" (p. 640). Cf. also p. 546: "Mere springs and coils produced the inward movement of our clockwork man."

failure. Of course, juxtaposed to the tragedy of this "failure," we have the aesthetic success of Kinbote's commentary and *Pale Fire* as a work of art. But this "success" exists only beyond the bounds of Kinbote's tale; it is a labor of which the fruits are only to be reaped by us, the readers of the novel. When all is said and done, Kinbote's own attitude towards his commentary, especially if we take seriously the hints at suicide discussed above,[537] seems to revolve more around a "gradual loss of make-believe."[538] Perhaps one of the final questions *Pale Fire* confronts us with, then, is a question that concerns the balance between ethics and aesthetics. For we may, and I do, ultimately wonder: does the aesthetic gratification we take in reading *Pale Fire* outweigh the Kinbotian suffering that constitutes its condition of possibility?

[537] Cf. note 524.
[538] An expression borrowed from contemporary author Cormac McCarthy. See: McCarthy, Cormac. *The Sunset Limited: A Novel in Dramatic Form.* London: Picador, 2010 (2006), p. 120.

Chapter 8: Inconclusive Evidence: An Epilogue on Loss and Happiness.

"So let us wonder on,
***lest* truth make all things plain"**[539]

8.1. Looking Back

Now where did it go?

We all lose things. Keys, coins, feelings, lovers. Lives – no human being has ever lived life without losing it; loss somehow seems to be the price of admission.[540] Some of the things we lose, we lose reluctantly. No parent, safe perhaps the Citian sage himself – and one may be forgiven for casting doubt on his casual, cool candor[541] every now and then – reacts merrily to the death of a child. Even the most half-hearted collector will not relinquish his most prized possession without a hesitant qualm of deceived attachment. The sigh of an abandoned lover consists of more than just thin air. On the other hand, there are many persons and objects that leave our lives without our even noticing it. Losing a penny, if you are not a passionate numismatist or a happy child collecting everything that shines, probably will not greatly aggravate you. Parting with the habitually unfamiliar people who shared the same ride with you on the subway most likely won't cause you to break into violent sobs (at least not on a daily basis).

Yet whether we have lost something or someone against our will, or indifferently, without really noticing, the event of retrieving someone or recuperating something after a certain interval of time, is always a happy event. The simple sight of an object we had forgotten we possessed provokes a particular jolt of pleasure in the intimate circuitry of our consciousness, and we are traversed by a spark of merry recognition when one of the random persons we had left on the subway of the preceding paragraph, now takes off her

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[539] Adapted from: Shakespeare, William. *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* act 5, scene 1, line 127).

[540] Emily Dickinson eloquently reminds us of this condition in these wily, funny, wry, deceptively cruel lines: "I took one Draught of Life – I'll tell you what I paid – Precisely an existence – The market price, they said." Cited from: Hollander, John (ed.). *American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century, Volume Two*. New York: The Library of America, 1993, p. 314.

[541] In the famous *Discourses*, or *Logoi*, which consist of an account of Epictetus' famous lessons as written down by his pupil Arrian, it is said that "Meeting Epictetus was like meeting a stone or a statue" (*Dialogues* 3.9.12-14), cited by: Long, A. A. *Epictetus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002, p. 12. For a general overview on the genesis of this text and more information on the relationship between Epictetus and Arrian see Long, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-43.

coat and suddenly transforms into the familiar stranger we realize we have seen before on that same train, days, months, perhaps years ago.

Human beings tend to silently assume that that which we are liable to lose, we may also at some point recover. In cases where sensory proof seems to point to a different conclusion, most notably regarding human life as a whole, we have given ample proof of our aptitude for figuring out ways of contradicting the evidence through the creation of tales, rituals, moralities, religions, stories. Those are just a few concrete instantiations of what could be called dialectical forms of resistance to the phenomenon of loss. In the second chapter of this thesis, I considered the potency of such dialectical resistance through a reflection on the formal process of dialectical thought itself, and by confronting it with one very radical example of loss-related suffering provided by Nabokov's *Bend Sinister*. The confrontation resulted in a collision: there proved to be dimensions of loss and suffering with which dialectical thought could not successfully come to terms. After having found, that, although dialectical thought can bring us a long way into the reconciliation of the subject and the sources of its suffering, there was no convincing way in which it could be made to think the phenomenon of suffering all the way through to its illogical end, *à savoir*, death; after that, it was decided that dialectical thought would either have to accept to keep a reverential distance from suffering, and learn to live with the intellectual drawbacks of this distance, or, if stubborn enough and try to fondle death in its triadic fangs anyway, be violently brought to a halt by it.

Over the course of later chapters it turned out that "loss" was not just a phenomenon imposed upon the self from the outside. Loss, we found, is more than something that just happens to us. Beyond all heteronomy, we saw that loss also had its autonomous appearance, deep within the confines of the self. As shown, through the philosophical explorations of the moral problematic in *Pnin*, *Transparent Things*, *Ada*, *Lolita*, and *Pale Fire*, a fundamental part of becoming what we are is determined by the other of this becoming, by *giving up* (on) elements of what we were and/or might have been. This other could not simply be determined in terms of a negative or synthesizable other. The process of becoming what we are was no dialectic process: the other of identity turned out to be something that could not be sublated into any eventual shape the self takes – it had to be given up more radically, it had to be delibarately lost. In the concrete

world of our moral reality, we concluded, there is no such thing as an either/and scenario: selfhood implies a deeper and more complex negation, not an *Aufhebung*, but an *Aufgabe.* Having crossed the long and winding course of chapters that has lead up to the present – and last – one, a pattern might be discerned from the five novels discussed after *Bend Sinister*. Pnin, Humbert, Kinbote, Van, Hugh – all are characters who are somehow entangled in a tension between persistent arrogations of the past and the delicate demands of the present. In order to become what they were, or before becoming what they were, the deciding factor always revolved around what could be termed an equation of their losses. How to equate that which they had *already lost* with that which was *yet to be lost*, in order to overcome the first loss through the latter loss?

For the most part, the chapters above were focused on the stances these characters take towards dealing with this tension, and on the equations they came up with to come to terms with it. Some of these equations added up to make for a relatively happy outcome (Pnin, Van); others ended tragically (Humbert, Kinbote, Hugh). But what all of these characters shared, was a certain sense of suffering from the above-mentioned tension between that which they sought to become, and that which they were. Could this suffering be said to be an inherent part of the *Aufgabe* of identity? Could it be a necessary consequence of the fact that identity cannot be a matter of *Aufhebung*? If selfhood can be thought of as a dynamic result of the equation between loss and creation, if our capacity to create is always in some way founded in and upon our capacity to destroy, if losing ourselves is the condition of possibility for winning ourselves – is suffering, then, perhaps, the price we pay for creativity?

On the basis of the explorations above, one could be tempted to reply positively to the questions asked here. And yet, I find myself wondering if instead of a conclusion along these lines, instead of presenting here a conclusion *at all*, a true philosophical attitude does not demand a different stance at this point. If the philosophical attitude is one that takes its starting point from wonderment, from asking questions, can we be sure it has to end in providing answers? How does the course of a philosophical reflection reflect on this initial commencement in and from wonder? Of course, we must guide our reflections earnestly – but do we not risk to irrevocably lose something of this grounding wonder if we take the *progress* of reflections *too* seriously? Should we not take care to make sure our reflections

do not stop to reflect the source of wonderment which they are supposed to reflect? What has become of the reflection that has progressed into a conclusion? Does it still reflect the wonder from which it sprung? Does it still reflect *anything at all*? Arguably not: the thought that has become conclusion reflects nothing but itself – it has grown out of touch with the wonderment that brought it forth. This thought is no reflection, it has become a statement. A statement that may clarify, instruct, teach, contain truth – but not reflect. My intention in the present chapter, the last one in a series of eight, is not to provide an end to previous reflections, but to keep reflecting, to not lose the source of wonderment out of sight; in brief, to let reflections remain reflections.

In one of his many diary entries, Emerson remarks that "Genius is very well but it is enveloped & undermined by wonder. The last fact is still Astonishment, mute, bottomless, boundless, endless Wonder."[542] Instead of opposing "wonder" here to a perhaps more familiar counterpart, such as "knowledge" or "science," Emerson opposes it to "Genius." To grasp the full sense of this opposition between "genius" and "wonder," we must read this diary remark in conjunction with a statement at the beginning of his famous essay on *Self-Reliance*, published earlier that year.[543] Genius, as defined there, indicates primarily a believing in one's own thoughts and deepest convictions, the belief that "what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men."[544] With this specific definition of genius in mind, it becomes clear why Emerson chooses it as the antonym of wonder. If genius has to do with believing in your own thoughts and insights and their potency to be of universal value, and as such can be deemed a form of *certainty*, wonder, on the other hand, is what undermines precisely this certainty. What makes this undermining power of wonder so special, is that unlike most "undermining" forces, it is not at all a negative force. Although "wonder" clearly takes the position of the negative term in the opposition between genius and wonder, its effect is no way near negative. On the contrary: the wonder that undermines genius leads to a state of astonishment Emerson values positively. Wonder is

[542] Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Journal G." In: *Selected Journals 1841-1877*. New York: The Library of America, 2010, p. 27.
[543] I.e., in March 1841. The journal entry is dated November 10th 1841.
[544] See: Emerson, "Self-Reliance": "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, — that is genius." (Cited from: Emerson, *The Portable Emerson*, *op. cit.*, p. 138.)

both what undermines genius and what grounds it. A little bit further on in the same diary entry, Emerson seems even to go as far as to define wonder as the grounding criterium for intelligence *in se*: "When we meet an intelligent soul all that we wish to ask him, - phrase it how we will, - is, 'Brother, have you wondered? Have you seen the Fact?' "

Emerson reminds us that "the last fact" is indeed "wonder." The act of wondering does not imply a negating of what we know, does not amount to a denial of the facts. Wonder "undermines" and "envelops" our facts and certainties. It is what underlies them as the source from which they flow. It is what keeps these facts flowing, and that which may turn the gentle flow of factuality into the towering waves of certainty. But wonder is also the calm indentation below the bluff that receives what remains of these waves once they have been shattered against it; the quiet niche where all facts are suspended and where we look at our certainties from a distance.

We may recall, from the first pages of this thesis, Wittgenstein's remark that the pursuit of the sort of questions moral philosophy asks tends to have us "running against the walls of our cage." Wittgenstein also added that this bumping into walls is hopeless (yet not to be ridiculed). Against this hopelessness, I expressed the hope that a conversational analysis of Nabokov's works would help us, if not to find our way out of Wittgenstein's cage, at least to think of this cage in more positive terms by regaining consciousness of the fact that we are indeed, as John Shade expectantly muses, "most artistically caged." My hope now, is that the analyses above have brought the reader to what Emerson calls the "last fact," the fact of wonder and astonishment. To convince her or him that the artistry of our cage is worth the potential bruises resulting from our running against its walls has been the main goal; to show that to endure in our moral questioning, to persevere in the pursuit of ethical exploration even if it may not result in certainties or conclusions, is a worthwhile activity nonetheless. Surely, we may end up with a nasty bump on the head every now and then, but that does not seem like an overly exorbitant price to pay for the moments of *Besinnung*, reflection, wonder, or even astonishment our endless moral questioning may lead to. I can only hope such reflection or wonder has sprung up here and there from the conversational space that I have tried to create between Nabokov's works and a series of philosophical texts.

Thus, I will present no formal conclusion in this last chapter. Nor will I attempt to summarize my earlier reflections into answers. Instead, to fall back on the words from the *exergue* cited above, I will try to "wonder on." Having clarified the "why" for this wondering on, it may now be asked: "how?" Answer: by turning once more to the original problematic that got our reflections going in the first place. By returning to, that is, by taking up once more, the question of loss, and asking, again: is there any way in which we can make sense of it? Instead of analyzing its main consequences in terms of suffering and selfhood, I want to focus in this final chapter on loss itself. What does it mean to lose something? Where do the things we lose go to? What is the relationship between loss and disappearance? Between loss and retrieval? Is there any way in which we can come to terms with the perpetual presence of this looming absence, *despite and beyond* the insights we have now gained concerning the fundamental role it plays in our moral quest(s) for selfhood? In order to do so, I will take up one more novel by Nabokov. In this case, it somehow seems fitting that we should pick up his first English novel, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, last.

8.2. The Conjuror's Rabbit

"I sometimes wonder," a fictional character invented by another fictional character in a work of fiction by Nabokov says, "where the things we shed are – because they must go *somewhere*, you know, - lost hair, fingernails…"[545] This work of fiction is *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, a novel that combines elements from the biographical, detective, picaresque and a host of other genres. In simple terms, it can be described as the tale of a personal quest. A narrator called V. is in search of a half-brother he has lost sight of. Who? A half-Russian, half-English writer named Sebastian Knight. But before I fully turn my attention to Nabokov's first English-language novel, I want to take a quick look at the very first novel Nabokov ever wrote, in Russian. For interestingly enough, a similar instance of the expression of wonder just cited can be found in Nabokov's *Mary* (*Mashenka*). As *its* protagonist, named Ganin, wanders around the streets of Berlin, mentally reviewing

[545] *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, p. 76.

recollections attached to his childhood in Russia, he is described as "[…] a god, recreating a world that had perished,"[546] but eventually, is forced to ask himself:

> And where is it all now? […] Where is the happiness, the sunshine, where are those thick skittles of wood which crashed and bounced so nicely, where is my bicycle with the low handlebars and the big gear? It seems there's a law which says that nothing ever vanishes, that matter is indestructible; therefore the chips from my skittles and the spokes of my bicycle still exist somewhere to this day.[547] The pity of it is that I'll never find them again – never. I once read about the "eternal return." But what if this complicated game of patience never comes out a second time?[548]

Two levels of reality and meaning are contrasted and superposed here. On one level, the bicycle spokes have disappeared for good. There is a sense in which it will have to be accepted that these particular spokes are irretrievable to, and have been irrevocably lost by, Ganin. No such things as eternal recurrences or returns: one may shuffle and reshuffle the cards of life, but it is not likely any particular "game of patience" will come out twice. And yet the ultimacy of this unrepeatable character of the scenes and events of life is contrasted with a forceful "law," one that says that "nothing ever vanishes," and which tells us that even if there are things we do not retrieve, we do not have to conclude from it that they are lost. Like the speck of coal dust from *Pnin* and the shed fingernails in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, these spokes are lost, but perhaps not absolutely irretrievable. And indeed, Ganin may or may not ride that same bicycle ever again, but the fact remains that the spokes of his bicycle will briefly trundle by again, in another bright flash of memory, set in motion, this time, by "a tender whiff of carbide" emanating from a busy Berlin street:

> And that chance exhalation helped Ganin to remember more vividly yet the rainy Russian late August and early September, the torrent of happiness, which the specters of his Berlin life kept interrupting. Straight out of the bright country house, he would plunge into the black bubbling darkness and ignite

[546] *Mary*, p. 33.
[547] A curious reverberation of this phrase, and the one from *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* cited at the beginning of this section, can be found in *Pnin*, whose narrator stops to wonder what may have happened to a speck of coal that got caught in young Pnin's eye. Although unable to say anything at all about the whereabouts of this tiny speck after so many years have passed, he is forced to conclude that it must still "exist somewhere." Cf. *Pnin*, pp. 423-424: "My first recollection of Timofey Pnin is connected with a speck of coal dust that entered my left eye on a spring Sunday in 1911. […] I wonder where that speck is now? The dull, mad fact is that it *does* exist somewhere."
[548] *Mary*, p. 34.

> the soft flame of his bicycle lamp; and now, when he inhaled that smell of carbide, it brought back everything at once: the wet grasses whipping against his moving leg and wheel spokes; the disk of milky light that imbibed and dissolved the obscurity, the different objects that emerged from it […].[549]

That is all well and good, one may protest, but the quick glance memory allows us to have at these spokes has nothing to do with the fact that Ganin will most likely never be able to ride *that* bike again, on *that* same day, in *those* same woods, experiencing those precise feelings of happiness. And that seems like a fair protest. But then again, the point is perhaps not that the evocation of these spokes in memory effectively brings them back, but that it (literally) reminds us that there is, somehow, a *constancy* to these spokes that makes them spin beyond themselves, that keeps them and the sensations attached to them turning in our minds. This constancy engenders more than just immaterial specters of memory: real feelings of happiness are attached to a recollection of an object that, as Ganin's law has it, must still exist somewhere.

One may think of Ganin's law as simply a form of naive or wishful thinking. And maybe that is all there is to it. But it must be stressed that such skepticism would not take anything away from the authenticity of Ganin's *experience* of loss, and more importantly, from the accurate description it provides of an intricate paradox of human experience. For how are we to reconcile, on the one hand, the given fact that by nature we are creatures that grow attached to the things and beings that surround us, and on the other hand, the evident and cruel truism that all that surrounds us, sooner or later, is lost? How to reconcile the inconstancy of nature with the desire for constancy inherent in *our* nature?

One could take a sanguine or skeptical stance towards these questions, and posit that memory is but deception, that recollections are but siren songs from a past that does not, should not, or need not concern us anymore. Yes, we all lose things, and yes, these things have a way of calling out from the depths of our being – but we are in no way obliged to heed the call. Let us just close our ears, and all will be fine. All is lost eventually, this is just the way of the world, perhaps even its condition of possibility, better to accept it. This view tends to veer towards inconstancy, and in its most radical form refuses to grant any reality to constancy at all: what has been, has been. No turning around, no retrievals, what's

[549] *Mary*, pp. 66-67.

gone is gone. The opposite stance or view tends to give more credibility to constancy. Things *seem* to pass and perish, it holds, but in (or beyond) reality, *ultimately*, nothing is ever really lost. One of the more forceful incarnations of this view is presented by most variants of Christianity: things may seem to disappear, but never fear, in the end, all will be made whole again. You may lose a loved one down here, but you will find her back again up there.

What makes Ganin's stance interesting, is that it seems to reunite aspects of both of these views. On the one hand, there is the absolute certainty, a conviction backed up by the firmness of a "law," that nothing is ever lost. On the other, the definite insight, that these un-lost things will not ("never […] never") be found back. From the point of view of logic, this seems a wildly absurd stance to take: either a thing is absolutely lost, and you will not be able to find it back, or it is not absolutely lost, and you may be able to retrieve it. From the point of view of human reasoning though, Ganin's stance is perhaps not that bizarre: many of us take up some such meddled stance towards loss, summoning up gods and other principles of constancy when we need them, abandoning them somewhere along the road when we think or feel we are doing fine again.

Another remarkable thing to note is that, whereas most of Nabokov's characters are like soaring supernovas, shining only when they self-destruct, Ganin actually seems to form an exception to this rule: he is, or at least appears to be, relatively happy. Both fragments I have cited exude happiness, and in both the word itself is effectively used. On the last page of the book, the last glimpse of Ganin's mental state we catch is one of "pleasurable excitement," as he comfortably dozes off on a train headed towards the south of France.[550] As we have seen, other Nabokov characters are invariably brought down by the siren songs of nostalgia and their impossibility to liberate themselves from what they have lost: Humbert Humbert's childhood love affair with Annabel, Krug's mourning the death of his wife, and Hugh Person's failure to break with the past are all instances of this.

Note the paradox inherent in formulating the cause of the demise of these characters: to liberate yourself from what you have lost seems to make no logical sense at all; what you lose is what disappears out of sight, what is not there anymore. So whence the

[550] *Mary*, p. 114.

need to liberate yourself from these things? To get rid of what is not even here in the first place? How can one be tied to what is not there? And if what loss does, is precisely *to take away* the ties between a subject and what is other to it, then what is it we think we need to liberate ourselves from? This is precisely the paradox of loss: we are already cut off from that which is lost, and yet still feel the need to cut our ties from it – however fiercely we may try to hack and hash about us, at some point the realization that there are no ties to be cut must dawn upon us. This is perhaps what makes up for the feelings of despair, fury, or even madness human beings experience in relation to the phenomenon of loss: we cannot effectively liberate ourselves from things that aren't there anymore; we are chained to loss in a mysterious way; these are fetters not made of metal or cast-iron, but of something airier, yet infinitely stronger.

Could a Wittgensteinian admonition, to the effect that to speak of "liberating oneself from loss" constitutes a fallacy of thought and language, provide any comfort to the sufferer here? Maybe, maybe not. But whether one concludes that experiences like these are but the demented figments of a mind in mourning, or whether one accepts them as pointing to the fact that the things and persons we lose have a constancy beyond their being lost, we still have to deal with the remarkable case of Ganin: the man who has lost many things (a country, a childhood, a lover) that were important to him, yet manages, not just to be happy in the wake of what he has lost, but to tie up an important aspect of his happiness with the very awareness that he has lost these things. How, the Humberts, Kinbotes, Hughs, and Krugs of the world might reasonably ask, does he do it?

As I already pointed out, the revolving spokes of Ganin's bicycle seem to be linked in no coincidental way to William's lost hairs and fingernails. William, as mentioned, is a fictional character in a novel entitled *Lost Property*, itself a work of fiction said to have been written by a fictional author called Sebastian Knight, the half-brother of a fictional character called V., whom another V., Nabokov, this time, uses to narrate a fictional biography he intends to call *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, which shares it title with the novel written by Nabokov and is presented to the reader as: *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. It will not come as a surprise that this heightened degree of narrative complexity has caused most critics to be drawn towards analyses of the intricacies of its structural

devices. We'll come to a discussion of one such analysis below. But for the moment, we are concerned with questions of loss and happiness.

William's remark (that the hairs and fingernails we lose must still exist somewhere) may seem haphazard, perhaps even a tad mawkish. In fact, drunkenness is precisely what William's fellow tenant, a conjuror with whom the remark is shared, assumes to be its source: " 'Been drinking again,' suggested the conjuror without much curiosity." And the conjuror may be forgiven for thinking this: the scene is laid late at night, and William has just returned from a date with a loved one. Yet the latter insists that he is not drunk at all: "I am merely happy," he says. Why does the feeling that these objects, in themselves valueless, "must go *somewhere*" make William so happy? Could this happiness be related to the intimation that if these objects go *somewhere*, they are, in accordance with Ganin's "law," notwithstanding appearances, not really lost? Absolutely irretrievable, but perhaps not lost?

Of course, one may feel the urge to call a halt to our reflection here: is not this man, one might ask, merely "happy" because he has just returned from a date with a girl he loves? Indeed, the lingering sense of this enjoyment might still be on his mind when William confronts the conjuror with his insight. And yet the certainty that these lost hairs and fingernails "must go *somewhere*," I would argue, is to be read precisely both as a complement and a contrast to the preceding part of the scene where William's feelings *during* the tryst with the girl are described. There, at the point of saying goodbye, William suddenly starts sobbing: "All of a sudden she felt that his face was wet. He covered it with his hand and groped for his handkerchief. 'Raining in Paradise,' he said… 'the onion of happiness… poor Willy is willy nilly a willow.' "[551] His inamorata does not really understand: " 'I'm as happy as you,' she said, 'but I don't want to cry in the least or to talk nonsense.' " And William tries to explain again: " 'But can't you see,' he whispered, 'can't you see that happiness at its very best is but the zany of its own mortality?' "[552]

William, it turns out, was not simply trying to tell his sweetheart that he was happy, he was trying to give expression to that strange human feeling which, at moments of great happiness, may creep upon the happy subject: borrowing an expression from Roman

[551] *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, p. 75.
[552] *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, p. 76.

philosopher Boethius, we might term this feeling "the frailty of happiness."[553] When happiness rises to levels beyond our expectation, there is a moment where happiness itself announces the possibility of its future cancellation. Happiness, at these moments, reveals itself to be "the zany of its own mortality" – it is a movement that has endurance only by force of its being driven to its limits. We know that by driving it to and beyond these limits, the only final result can be that we drive it past the bourn of its own endurance, but then – there is no other way. Happiness, here, is a form of ecstatic excitement bordering on madness, it only thrives when driven to its "zany"; it cannot be sustained on any middle ground. Peace, virtue, a comfortable quiet feeling-at-ease, all these may thrive on cool middling moderation – happiness itself has only one direction; it veers forward towards the cliff of its own substance. Once this movement has caught up speed, you can either stand by and watch it disappear into the distance, or try to catch up with it and risk hurtling yourself off the cliff with it when it does. Or?

Or – and this, I think, is the point William is trying to make to the conjuror right afterwards – or perhaps there is a third possibility, an insight that may somehow provide, if not a solution, then at least a form of consolation for those "rainy days in paradise." This consolation is more complex than a simple acceptance of the fact that "the sun can't shine down on us everyday." Nor does it take up the advice of that old sea-captain[554] who recommended we take a good swing at the sun behind the clouds if it deigned offending us by not providing us with what we were due. No such passivity, nor such blatant proactivity do we find in William. He is more subtle, he has no need for addressing the skies overhead, and only needs the smallest, most futile of objects to get his message across: a hair, a fingernail will do. Once more: what is this message?

I take William's nightly confabulation with the conjuror to represent Ganin's law as presented in *Mary* in elliptical form: in contrast to the earlier realization that happiness is the "zany of its own mortality," the awareness that the lost hairs and fingernails have a constancy beyond their disappearing out of sight casts a calming cognizance upon

[553] Boethius. *The Consolation of Philosophy* (transl. P. G. Walsh). Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999, book II, chapter 8.

[554] A relation to Melville's Ahab. Cf. Melville, *Moby Dick,* chapter XXXVI, where captain Ahab, heaped and tasked, exclaims: "Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me. For could the sun do that, then could I do the other; since there is ever a sort of fair play herein, jealousy presiding over all creations. But not my master, man, is even that fair play. Who's over me? Truth hath no confines."

William's mind. If these smallest and frailest of objects will not be irrevocably lost – then perhaps larger, more important sources of happiness may be thought to have a constancy to them that makes them flow and radiate beyond their disappearance out of sight. The happiness experienced during this second moment is a different happiness – it is no longer the madness of wild joy, the bleary-eyed surge of ecstasy: this second happiness is reassured, comforted, settled-down happiness.

One might feel I am making too much of these small objects. Possibly. But let me try to make my case a little stronger. Let us reflect, for a moment, upon the character with whom William has this conversation: a conjuror. A conjuror? Why would Sebastian (or Nabokov) choose to have William share this conversation with a magician? Why are we instructed about the profession of this fellow at all? Why, instead of giving us his name, do we only get to know him by his profession? What card is being played here?

The conjuror is a minor character, playing a minor role in what appears to be a minor scene in a novel inside a novel which may revolve around all sorts of people, but, at least so it seems, definitely not around him. After the quick cameo appearance I have just described, he is left in his apartment by Sebastian, not to be seen again afterwards – that is, until the very last lines of the novel.

In these last lines of the book, the old conjuror more or less returns – as it behooves a true magician – as if out of nowhere. "More or less," because he does not actually reappear on stage; yet he is said to be "waiting in the wings." Among more hermetic, metaphysically charged lines, the narrator allows us a summary glance at all the main characters of the novel, pulling up the curtain one last time, so that the audience may have a good last look:

> I feel as if I were impersonating him [Sebastian] on a lighted stage, with the people he knew coming and going – the dim figures of the few friends he had, the scholar, and the poet, and the painter, - smoothly and noiselessly paying their graceful tribute; and here is Goodman, the flat-footed buffoon, with his dicky hanging out of his waistcoat; and there – the pale radiance of Clare's inclined head, as she is led away weeping by a friendly maiden. They move round Sebastian – round me who am acting Sebastian, - and the old conjuror waits in the wings with his hidden rabbit; and Nina sits on a table in

> the brightest corner of the stage, with a wineglass of fuchsined water, under a painted palm. And then the masquerade draws to a close.[555]

All of the main characters make a last appearance here, that is, all of the main characters from V.'s narration. None of the characters from the second fictional level, that of the novels written by Sebastian, are reintroduced – except for one: the conjuror. Given the moment of this appearance, at the very *dénouement* of the journey, one may wonder: why does this minor character from one of Sebastian's novels make his appearance amongst a host of characters that are more central to the plot of Nabokov's novel (Goodman, Clare Bishop, Nina)?

Most of the existing commentaries on the closing scene of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* tend to focus on the more hermetic part of the conclusion, where both a metaphysical and a narratological truth are revealed. Right before the condensed *bal des têtes* witnessed above, V. somewhat weightily muses: "the soul is but a manner of being – not a constant state – that any soul may be yours, if you find and follow its undulations. The hereafter may be the full ability of consciously living in any soul chosen […]." And this thought is picked up and continued in the last line of the book: "[…] try as I may, I cannot get out of my part: Sebastian's mask clings to my face, the likeness will not be washed off. I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we are both someone whom neither of us knows."[556]

The wording faintly echoes Plato's myth of Err, and also calls to mind, as J. B. Sisson writes, "the ancient fraternal theme," which Nabokov seems to have "reversed": "Cain and Abel, like Oedipus and Jocasta's sons Eteocles and Polynices, become fatally estranged, whereas Sebastian's death brings V. and Sebastian close together at last."[557] This truth or "secret of the interchangeability of souls," as Sisson calls it,[558] is often taken to be *the* conclusion Nabokov's novel as a whole. Given the air of conclusiveness and the metaphysical heft V. builds into these phrases, it is no wonder, perhaps, that when discussing the concluding section of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, most commentators

[555] *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, pp. 159-160.
[556] *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, p. 160.
[557] Alexandrov (ed.), *Garland Companion*, p. 633.
[558] Alexandrov (ed.), *Garland Companion*, p. 639.

choose to cite and discuss the two musings on the interchangeability of souls to make sense of the relation between Sebastian and V., without paying much attention to the phrases in between (the ones constituting the condensed "bal des têtes"). Brian Boyd, for example, in his discussion of the conclusion of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, focuses on precisely these two moments, with four spaced dots blotting out the reappearance of the cast and the conjuror waiting in the wings.[559] Similarly, Michael Wood, after his insightful statement that it is hard to decide whether the conclusion of this novel presents a revelation or, rather, "the burlesque of a revelation,"[560] leaves out the last glance at the cast to focus on the same metaphysical elements of the conclusion as Boyd and many others.[561] And yet, this sort of treatment of the conclusion literally leaves our conjuror waiting in the wings. Why, and how, do we get him out of there?

To reply to the "how" part of the question first. Charles Nicol, as early as 1967, lays bare the interesting echoes and reflections that are to be found in V.'s narrative when linked to the narrative of the Knightian novels as described inside the fiction.[562] Taking up on his thoughts, and taking them to their logical limit, I would want to argue that a same sort of reflexivity can be found in the very conclusion of the novel itself as well. About the ending of Sebastian's last novel, where the mysterious main character dies before sharing with us what ostensibly would have been a life-changing truth, V. tells us:

> The man is dead and we do not know. The asphodel on the other shore is as doubtful as ever. We hold a dead book in our hands. Or are we mistaken? I sometimes feel when I turn the pages of Sebastian's masterpiece that the "absolute solution" is there, somewhere concealed in some passage I have read too hastily, or that it is intertwined with other words whose familiar guise deceived me.[563]

Following the form of Nicol's mirroring argument, I ask: could it be, that Nabokov, by placing a few weighty lines that exude all the air of philosophical seriousness and heightened metaphysical importance, is tricking the reader, at the end of *The Real Life of*

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[559] Boyd, *The Russian Years*, *op. cit.,* p. 498.
[560] Wood, *The Magician's Doubts*, p. 51.
[561] Wood, *The Magician's Doubts*, p. 52.
[562] Nicol, Charles. "The Mirrors of Sebastian Knight." In: *Nabokov, the Man and His Work* (ed. L. S. Dembo). Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 1967, pp. 88-94.
[563] *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, p. 140.

Sebastian Knight, into reading somewhat too hastily ourselves the lines that are placed in between, hiding the conjuror and his rabbit in the penumbral shadow between the metaphysical "conclusion" concerning the interchangeability of souls and the "narrative" conclusion that forms the last line of the book: "I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we are both someone whom neither of us knows"? If so, may we assume that the truth of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, its "absolute solution," is perhaps not to be sought in the dazzling metaphysical trick that untangles the narrative, but instead, as in Sebastian's last novel, *The Doubtful Asphodel*, can be found, not in the conclusion, but somewhere else altogether, "concealed in some passage [we] have read too hastily […] intertwined with other words whose familiar guise deceived [us]"?

Meanwhile, the conjuror is still waiting in the wings. If we look at the short descriptions of the other characters that are being roll-called, at the end of the novel, they aren't too surprising: we have seen them before, and through their epithets and attributes they are represented in their familiar guise: they appear here as we had left them earlier. But now look closer at the conjuror. He is carrying something: we cannot really see what he is carrying for ourselves, for it is said to be "hidden," but, taking V.'s word for it, we are made aware that he is carrying a "rabbit." Thinking back on the scene where he first and last made his appearance, something must strike us: he did not have this rabbit before. Yet during the conversation between William and the conjuror we discussed, there *was* talk of a rabbit. What was said? If we make the effort to leaf back, we read, after William has countered the magician's suspicions of drunkenness by his assertion that he is "merely happy": " 'You don't look it,' said the solemn old man. 'May I buy you a rabbit?' asked William. 'I'll hire one when necessary,' the conjuror replied drawing out the 'necessary' as if it were an endless ribbon."[564]

Apparently, the conjuror has, all the while waiting in the wings of the novel, seen reason to obtain his hired rabbit. Why? What made it "necessary"? And why did he stress that word before? People usually stress words when they are trying to draw attention to them, or when they want to convey something transcending the usual meaning of the word to us. What *is* the message the conjuror is trying to get across? Before we can start trying to

[564] *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, p. 76.

answer these questions, another element must be introduced and added to the course of our reflection. Element, or animal? For now that we have returned the conjuror to the spotlight, we might as well have a closer look at his rabbit. Perhaps if we can find out where he "hired" his rabbit, we end up getting the beginning of our answer to some of our other questions.

We turn once more to Sebastian's doubly fictional novel *Lost Property*, this time to the third chapter of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, where V. shares with us another passage from Sebastian's novel:

> I always think, […] that one of the purest emotions is that of the banished man pining after the land of his birth. I would have liked to show him straining his memory to the utmost in a continuous effort to keep alive and bright the vision of the past: the blue remembered hills and the happy highways, the hedge with its unofficial rose and the field with its rabbits, the distant spire and the near bluebell… But because the theme has already been treated by my betters and also because I have an innate distrust of what I feel easy to express, no sentimental wanderer will ever be allowed to land on the rock of my unfriendly prose.[565]

The passage is remarkable for more than one reason. It starts out as a celebration of nostalgic sentiment ("one of the purest emotions…"), then both reflects and casts doubt on the possibility ("I would have liked…") of adequately transforming these feelings into artistic prose, only to conclude that for what seem to be purely artistic reasons, such a project will not be executed by Sebastian. Although V. adds: "Whatever the particular conclusion of this passage, it is obvious that only one who has known what it is to leave a dear country could thus be tempted by the picture of nostalgia," we may reasonably doubt how tempted Sebastian (or the narrator of *his* novel) really was by the "picture of nostalgia" sketched here. Looking closer at the "nostalgic picture" itself, it turns out that the separate images that make up this picture have in fact all been culled from the "betters" mentioned almost immediately afterwards. As other critics have pointed out, the picture sketched here by Sebastian contains allusions to and elements from at least three poetic predecessors.[566] Upon closer inspection, one gets the impression that, whatever may be the

[565] *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, p. 20.
[566] Cf. Boyd's explanatory notes to the novel. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, pp. 675-676.

true nature of the nostalgic feelings aired here, first and foremost, Sebastian is playing a literary game in this passage. If so, why not play along? First, there is this short poem from A. E. Housman's *A Shropshire Lad:*

> INTO my heart on air that kills
> From yon far country blows:
> What are those blue remembered hills,
> What spires, what farms are those?
>
> That is the land of lost content,
> I see it shining plain,
> The happy highways where I went
> And cannot come again.

Secondly, we have these lines from Rupert Brooke's *The Old Vicarage, Grantchester*:

> […] and *there* the dews
> Are soft beneath a morn of gold.
> Here tulips bloom as they are told;
> Unkempt about those hedges blows
> An English unofficial rose;

Lastly, the grandiloquent opening lines of Thomas Gray's *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College:*

> Ye distant spires, ye antique towers,
> That crown the watery glade,
> Where grateful science still adores
> Her Henry's holy shade

All three allusions are uncovered and revealed by Brian Boyd in his notes to *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*.[567] Yet, if we take a closer look at the lines from the poems cited above

[567] Cf. previous note.

(which contain all of those cited by Boyd, plus a few additions), and compare them to the mirroring elements in Sebastian's prose, one of the elements of Sebastian's description seems to stand out, because it remains unexpectedly "unpaired." "The blue remembered hills" and the "happy highways" are precisely twinned to those in Housman's poem. "The hedge with its unofficial rose" is mirrored in Brooke's lyric, "the distant spire" is definitely related to Gray's "distant spires" and "antique towers" – but what about "the field with its rabbits"? Boyd's note doesn't speak of them, and, admittedly, there are no rabbits to be found in any of the three poems just cited. Yet there is an image that more or less corresponds to Sebastian's field of rabbits in the last stanza of Rupert Brooke's *The Old Vicarage, Grantchester*:

> Say, do the elm-clumps greatly stand
> Still guardians of that holy land?
> […]
> And after, ere the night is born,
> Do hares come out about the corn?
> […]
> Say, is there Beauty yet to find?
> And Certainty? and Quiet kind?
> Deep meadows yet, for to forget
> The lies, and truths, and pain? . . . oh! yet
> Stands the Church clock at ten to three?
> And is there honey still for tea?

Hares, as opposed to almost all other members of the family of Leporidae (who spend large parts of their days in subterraneous burrows), build their nests above-ground. Whether Nabokov's rabbits, safely hidden in their warm warrens, beneath the gleaming hedge and far from the lofty spires, are indeed counterparts of Brooke's mirthful drove of leverets in the dusk, is a question up for (potentially endless) debate; but the fact that precisely at this point, in the context of a passage concerning nostalgia and loss, Brooke's hare is replaced with a rabbit, thus offering us the third evocation of a rabbit *In The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, does not strike me as a coincidence. Nabokov (or Sebastian, or *his* narrator, or V., or all four of them) chooses to evoke a field of rabbits amongst these images of loss, and

whether willfully revising Brooke or not, this gives us a third rabbit-figure in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* which, given that this is not a work by Lewis Caroll or Beatrix Potter, cannot fail to capture our attention.

Recall, once more, our conjuror. He tells William, when offered a rabbit, that he will hire one when he needs it. Now think of what happens in the "nostalgia" passage above. There are no rabbits in Brooke's field, but Nabokov may be said to hire them when he needs them. Carrying the argument one step further we may say: Sebastian does not believe in the airing of sentimental feelings of nostalgia in artistic prose, but he borrows them (from Housman, Brooke, and Gray) when the need arises. Take another step further into the realm of interpretation and you can start to deduce a sort of overarching insight Nabokov (or Sebastian – both are experts in the matter) hands us for dealing with loss: there are a great many things in life that are lost along the way, but for those amongst us who can bring up the patience "to borrow," whatever is lost, wherever it is, may still said to be for hire. The market of loss is neither a buyer's nor a seller's market – it is a borrower's market, where things are for hire. But what does this "patience" consists in, precisely? In Nabokov's case, it amounts to the patience of the artist, or, to that of his Knightian equivalent: the patience of the conjuror.

In this life, everything is subjected to the possibility of loss. That which we have been given, we will be asked to give away or pass forth. We are not, as the Christian holds, receivers of the gift of life – for that which we are given in this life is never fully received – it is only borrowed.[568] One could call it the paradoxical ambiguity of being: all that is, may be lost. This ambiguity is necessary. All that is, has come to be, and given that it has come to be, it may at any moment return to its origin, the undefined and perhaps indefinable pre-ontological state of not-being-there-yet. But in that state of being which the poet or the

[568] Recall, in this context, also, *Lolita*'s revision of Shakespeare's "*To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow*" (*Macbeth*, act V, scene 5, line 19). Is Clare Quilty simply pulling off an anodine pun whilst Humbert holds him under gunshot when he jokes, begging his assailant for his life in return for his riches: "[…] you will be happy here, with a magnificent cellar, and all the royalties from my next play – I have not much in the bank right now but I propose to borrow – you know, as the Bard said, with that cold in his head, to borrow and to borrow and to borrow"? (*Lolita*, p. 301). Eric Naiman puts forward a convincing argumentation to deduce from this pun a truth concerning Quilty's sexual health. (See: Naiman, *Nabokov, Perversely*, *op. cit.*, pp. 38-39.) But beyond comedy, this pun also seems to contain, given the moment of its occurrence (right before Quilty's death), an intimation of the fragility of life itself, a reminder that indeed, our "tomorrows" do not belong to us, but are only borrowed, bestowed upon us, not as a gift that is there for us to keep, but as something that is only temporally lent to us – something which will either have to be returned, or, at best, given forth.

writer of fiction brings to life, things may be different: here one might attempt to create a circular realm of being where all that is, is absolutely. Of course, characters may die at some point in the course of the story, this or that object might disappear out of sight; but the point is this: they will *always* be there again, *and again*, each and every time the reader makes the effort to retake the story from the beginning.

And this opens up a possibility, or at least provides us with the courage for a question: what if, inside this fiction, I manage to create a sphere where all is hermetically connected and related? A sphere where all the signifiers stretch out, but only to taper back to their origins? And what if, in the texture of reality itself, a similar equation could be found? What if reality can be rearranged thus, that the contradicting theses of the paradox we found in *Mary* can be reconciled? Does this open up the possibility for belief in the existence of a world where all that is lost, somehow, remains? Feet back upon the ground, the most commonsensical answer to these questions would be: we would be giving ourselves over to the charm of an illusion if we believed such a world existed or could be made to exist.

And that is precisely the point I take Nabokov to make in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* when he decides to reintroduce the minor character of the conjuror at the end of his novel. For what else is a conjuror but one who can make things disappear and bring them back at will? The conjuror, who never really loses anything, to whom all loss is pretense and appearance, part of the show? Whatever is out of sight can be brought back at the flick of a finger – the calm and patient conjuror seems intrepid in the face of loss, precisely, because he knows he has rearranged things in such a way, that that which is lost is only ever out of sight. The intimation that provokes such happiness in Ganin and William, that whatever is lost, must still be *somewhere*, is a feeling that to the conjuror really does have the firmness and the certainty of a law. Why? Because *he* knows where the disappeared rabbit is, he needs not speculation or hope in order to believe in the possibility of its retrieval. His trick is knowledge: he knows when, where, and how to retrieve it.

Notwithstanding, a mystery still cloaks the conjuror. For even the conjuror's rabbit, as we saw, is only a hired rabbit. He does not possess it. And if this is the case, must we not assume that in some beyond-the-show sense, the conjuror too, is just as liable to be victimized by the bleak tempests of loss? Is the conjuror, not, after the show ends, exactly

like us, just one more borrower of tomorrows? But why then, does the conjuror from Nabokov's novel seem so sanguine? The conjuror loses no sleep over the whole hired-rabbit-situation: if anything, the undertone of nonchalance and poise sounding through in his remark that he'll just hire one when "necessary," must lead us to assume the contrary: our conjuror isn't worried about anything in the least. Where does his placidity come from?

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In his memoir, *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov writes:

> In my own case, when I come over Sophie's troubles [the book, *Les Malheurs de Sophie*] again – her lack of eyebrows and love of thick cream – I not only go through the same agony and delight that my uncle did, but have to cope with an additional burden – the recollection I have of him, reliving his childhood with the help of those very books. I see again my schoolroom in Vyra, the blue roses of the wallpaper, the open window. Its reflection fills the oval mirror above the leathern couch where my uncle sits, gloating over a tattered book. A sense of security, of well-being, of summer warmth pervades my memory. That robust reality makes a ghost of the present. The mirror brims with brightness; a bumblebee has entered the room and bumps against the ceiling. Everything as it should be, nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die.[569]

There seems to be a paradoxical point Nabokov is making time and time again: everything is always lost *and* nothing is ever lost. Yet if we can successfully create a state of mind where the constancy the things and people have in and through our faculties of recollection, collide with our awareness of the fragility of their temporal presence over the linear course of our lives, a precious spark of happiness will result from the collision. To accept that all is lost, *and* that nothing is ever lost, at first glance, may call to mind a familiar form of religious argumentation. But Nabokov does not speak of *future* reconciliations and retrievals. On the contrary, central to his experience of happiness on these occasions, is that consciousness is not facing forward, towards the future, but turned backwards, towards the past. The "robust reality" of a memory can make "a ghost of the present."

[569] *Speak, Memory*, pp. 421-422.

We have seen Nabokov play this trick before. But if in the other novels we have discussed, by reversing the ontological value of past and present, Nabokov creates nightmarish realms where his characters lose their bearings, there are strains of happiness pervading both *Mary* and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* that startle. For if anything, should not the knowledge that something we have lost does "exist somewhere," combined with the realization that this "somewhere" cannot be reached by us, provoke anger, frustration, despair, madness perhaps?

To understand Nabokov's (il)logic here, let us return again to the *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. Narrator V. describes *Lost Property* as:

> […] a kind of halt in his [Sebastian's] literary journey of discovery: a summing up, a counting of the things and souls lost on the way, a setting of bearings; the clinking sound of unsaddled horses browsing in the dark; the glow of a campfire; stars overhead.

So the novel in which William appears, as a whole, is conceived of as "a setting of bearings," "a counting of the things and souls lost on the way." "The stars overhead" (not unlike Kant's "starry heavens above" both clashing with and completing "the moral law within") form the cold distant antithesis to the "setting of bearings," but also provide, at the same time, the logical scenic impulse for such a setting of bearings. In its mysterious success, the "setting of bearings" described here starkly contrasts to the suicide note written by *Ada*'s Aqua, who we witnessed fatally murmuring: "I […] do not know where I stand. Hence I must fall."[570]

What does it mean to "set one's bearings"? In the light of the rest of the novel, and of many other works by Nabokov, I would say that it means to successfully determine one's place in, and one's relation to, what philosophers, or at least the metaphysical musers amongst them, think and speak of as "the whole." To determine one's relation to the whole does not necessarily mean to strive to absorb it, or to come to a complete understanding of it through either scientific or philosophical knowledge. For some people it can come to mean this, but for many such an all-encompassing striving will and need not be of their concern. As V. proposes elsewhere: "It is not the parts that matter, it is their

[570] Cf. above, chapter 5.

combinations"[571] – and rather than abstractly explaining to us what the "setting of bearings" means, V. opts to concretely show it to us, by giving us a peak at Sebastian's last novel, *The Doubtful Asphodel*:

> The answer to all questions of life and death, "the absolute solution" was written all over the world he had known: it was like a traveller realizing that the wild country he surveys is not an accidental assembly of natural phenomena, but the page in a book where these mountains and forests, and fields, and rivers are disposed in such a way as to form a coherent sentence […]. Thus the traveller spells the landscape and its sense is disclosed, and likewise, the intricate pattern of human life turns out to be monogrammatic, now quite clear to the inner eye disentangling the interwoven letters.[572]

Or, as Sebastian himself puts it:

> And as the meaning of all things shone through their shapes, many ideas and events which had seemed of the utmost importance dwindled not to insignificance, for nothing could be insignificant now, but to the same size which other ideas and events, once denied any importance, now attained.[573]

What *The Doubtful Asphodel* presents us with, I would argue, is the return of the traveller from *Lost Property* who has set forth on his journey and has now found his bearings more completely still. This time, the traveller not only makes an inventory of the items lost along the way, trying to determine his position in between that which is left behind and that which is yet to come – he does more, for he is able, now, to determine not only where he stands, but also to complete the picture by defining his relation to the whole, his part in the pattern. He is said to do this by "spelling" the landscape, by rearranging in his mind the apparent hodge-podge of sense-impressions of the world surrounding him into a "coherent sentence."

This passage from *The Doubtful Asphodel* and V.'s analysis of it do not speak directly about loss, but as both the inner logic of the passage, which seems to be a continuation of the journey sketched in *Lost Property*, as well as the title of the book suggest, what is said

[571] *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, p. 138.
[572] *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, p. 139.
[573] *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, p. 140.

here is to be related to the whole of the intricate reflection on loss that might be disentangled from *The Real Life Sebastian Knight*. As regards the titular flower, it can be paired to a famous description of "The Asphodel Meadows" at the beginning of book 24 of Homer's Odyssey where the Chiotic bard tells us that the souls of the dead "[…] reached the meadow of asphodel where dwell the souls and shadows of them that can labour no more."[574] In the end however, Sebastian's asphodel meadow remains "doubtful," notwithstanding the quiet and coherence reigning over his setting of bearings.

As long as we are inside the realm of fiction, where the texture of reality can be rearranged to exclude the reality of loss, where the combinations can be made to equate, where the overwhelming whole can be rendered coherent through the thoughtful pattern, we are like the conjuror on his stage, smiling in the face of loss, knowing we can make reappear whatever it is that has disappeared, playfully undermining the finality of loss. But once, upon deeper reflection, we come to realize that even the conjuror is only using a borrowed rabbit, we stagger back: so this was nothing but play, the only realm where the conjuror's rabbit never disappears is on his stage; after the show is finished, beyond the illumined boards of the *Bühne*, there's just no telling what may happen to the conjuror's curios. In fact, his rabbit isn't even his, he borrowed it – its rightful Owner, whatever his or her identity, may come and claim it, the lease may be ended any time.

The same goes for the case of *The Doubtful Asphodel*: while dwelling inside the fiction, the reader's consciousness snugly lodged between the covers of the book, V. may be convinced (and may convince us) that an absolute setting of bearings is possible; he may rightfully believe (and make us believe) in the possibility of a realm where all the signifiers are hermetically sealed up and comfortably related: the ultimate retrievability of all things lost needs not be doubted. Yet close the book and take another look at the title on the cover: this asphodel stems not from Homer's meadow in "the land of dreams,"[575] but from Sebastian's, and the actual chances of ever reaching the shores of these meadows beyond the confines of the covers of the book remains as doubtful as ever.

[574] Transl. Samuel Butler.
[575] Cf. Homer, *Odyssey*, Book XXIV, transl. Samuel Butler.

And so the Homeric "gates of the sun"[576] have been closed upon us, and we find ourselves back where we started, still lingering in the shade of the paradox we encountered at the beginning of this section: all is lost; yet nothing is lost. Should we keep pushing at the gates to find another way in?

In *Speak, Memory,* Nabokov refers to *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* as "that twisted quest […] with its gloriettes and self-mate combinations." And, indeed, if its conclusion is as paradoxical as it appears to be, a "self-mate combination" at first sight, may seem like an adequate description of where Nabokov's novel leads us. But a self-mate combination, despite the rather dramatic undertone of the word, does not, as one might expect, count as a loss in the vocabulary of chess. A self-mate combination actually constitutes the solution to a specific sort of chess problem, which demands that the player forces the opposing party to leave him with no other option but to bring a mate upon him. A successful self-mate combination is actually what the player, in this sort of chess problem, needs to "win" the game. So what is it, then, that is won over the course of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*?

Perhaps the hint of an answer might be found by relating what I have been saying about *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* to yet another of Nabokov's texts. The term "self-mate" is used by Nabokov at one more point over the course of his many auto-appraisals, this second time in connection to a short story, originally written in Russian, entitled *Christmas*.[577] *Christmas* is also a story about loss. A father has lost his son to an undefined illness, and most of the narrative consists of a description and exploration of the man's mourning. While mourning, the man visits his son's old study and goes through his belongings. One of these belongings is a butterfly chrysalis in an old tin case:

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[576] *Ibid.*

[577] Cf. J. B. Sisson's article on *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* in: Alexandrov (ed.), *Garland Companion*, *op. cit.*, p. 638. Nabokov, in an introductory note written for the publication of the story's English translation in 1976, more than 50 years after its original date of publication, says: "It [*Christmas*] oddly resembles the type of chess problem called selfmate." *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov,* p. 643. Besides this, Nabokov uses the term on one other occasion, but this time not directly in connection with any of his works, but in reply to the "letter" of a critic: "Mr. Adams' letter about me addressed to 'M. le baron de Stendhal' is an extremely witty piece – reminding me, I do not know why, of those macabre little miracles that chess problemists call suimates (White forces Black to win in a certain number of moves)." See: *Strong Opinions*, p. 297. For Adams' letter see: Newman and Appel Jr. (eds.), *For Vladimir Nabokov on his seventieth birthday*, *op. cit.*, pp. 333-336.

> […] an English biscuit tin that contained a large exotic cocoon which had cost three rubles. It was papery to the touch and seemed made of a brown folded leaf. His son had remembered it during his sickness, regretting that he had left it behind, but consoling himself with the thought that the chrysalis inside was probably dead.[578]

The biscuit tin is infused with emotion and meaning, from both the side of the young boy, who, as we learn, had a special predilection for butterfly hunting, and his father, who, among other memories, seems to specially prize one related to his son's passion: "[…] deftly plucking off with his net a butterfly that had settled on the railing. Now the boy sees his father. Forever-lost laughter plays on his face, under the turned-down brim of a straw hat burned dark by the sun […]."[579] Thus at the end of the story, when we find the father at the height of his despair, he is holding in his hand precisely this tin, and: "At that instant there was a sudden snap – a thin sound like that of an overstretched rubber band breaking." It turns out the father, having moved the tin from his son's cold desk, to a much warmer room, has caused the chrysalis inside it to hatch: "And then those thick black wings, with a glazy eyespot on each and a purplish bloom dusting their hooked foretips, took a full breath under the impulse of tender, ravishing, almost human happiness.[580]

Again, we hit upon the familiar Nabokovian pattern of turning chinks into links*:* something was thought to be lost, it proved not to be lost, and the insight that it is not or may not be, is in some way connected to the feeling of happiness. And yet, even though the story ends on this happy note, the reader may also feel faintly tricked once she looks up from the page and begins to wonder: what is the actual *worth* of this happiness when juxtaposed to the larger tragedy of the protagonist's loss and the suffering it causes? On the one hand, *Christmas* offers us a tale of maddening loss and irresolvable suffering: it presents a man hopelessly groping about him, struggling to make sense of an event that refuses to let itself be taken up into the realm of the rational. On the other hand, the end of the story contains an unforeseen surprise: something else of which we had, through reasonable deduction, concluded it had been lost, turns out to be still there, and magically unfurls in front of both the man and us in all its newly nascent glory. And it is precisely at

[578] *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, p. 134.
[579] *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, p. 132.
[580] *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, p. 136.

this point, that, once we connect the dots, we might be inclined to conclude that perhaps the author is trying to tell us something by having the story end in this way; perhaps the image of the butterfly is supposed to bring some sort of reassurance; decidedly, it must contain a hint at the existence of some hypothetic realm beyond the certainty of death, a limbo of things lost behind the curtains of casualty, a space beyond space where all that has been lost is waiting in the wings.

Such sentiments may linger for a while, but only for as long as we keep our eyes glued to the text. Close the book, and once more, cold reason will force you to conclude that in this world, no resurrection of butterflies is radiant enough to alleviate the sight of suffering, to mislead our memory into believing that the beauty and wonder of such a resurrection could make up for the death of a child. And that brings us again to our initial suimate position. We feel we have successfully taken up Nabokov's challenge: we have unearthed the message that even though we lose things all the time, there are countersigns all around us to indicate that nothing is ever really lost. We have connected the dots of the story and provided the mating combination. But not long afterwards another feeling starts to seep through: have we not somehow been deceived? Is not all this but trickery and illusion and make-believe? Come to think of it, what does it mean that we have solved a problem where the result is that we are in a mated position? The fact that to win this game, we must lose it, somehow leaves a lingering sense of bitterness on our readerly tongues, and if the only way to get rid of that bitter taste is to dive into the game once more, we may feel cheated: can the flame of a victory that stops burning beyond the confines of the playing field be worth the candle of the game?

And yet, as I reflect on all this, I tell myself: there must be more to it. Ganin, Sebastian, the father from *Christmas*, all these characters experience a genuine jolt of happiness. What is it that causes them to be happy in the face of the paradox that both nothing is lost, and everything is lost? Reason may judge them to be crazy for believing that the unexpected constancy of bicycle spokes, fingernails, fragile butterflies, have any moral weight at all against the sere emptiness the phenomenon of loss can leave us with – but there is no denying that these characters, beyond the verdict of all reason and proportion, draw genuine happiness from the fact that they can oppose the constancy of these brittle baubles to the inconstancy of what seems infinitely more valuable. Yes, all that is valuable

may eventually be lost, they admit, but look here: not everything that we thought was lost is really lost. Look at this fingernail, look at this butterfly: it turned out to be somewhere still. Evidently, all is not lost. The argumentation is both logically and proportionally flawed, but these characters don't seem to care. They are happy. The slightest evidence of constancy will suffice to soften the harsh reality of inconstancy. How?

Perhaps part of the answer to that question is to be found in what in the *Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is called a "setting of bearings"; recall Sebastian's traveler, for whom nothing was insignificant anymore, as "the meanings of all things shone through their shapes," and where all had come to be of the "same size." Happiness, it seems then, is not so much about the actual value or "size" of things and events, but more about a certain kind of the overall relation the self occupies to the things, persons, and events that surround her or him.

We've dwelled to some extent on the phenomenon of loss. It appears the concept seems intimately related to the notion of happiness in Nabokov's works. But the nature of this relation remains to be explored and defined.

Once more unto the breach?

8.3. Equating Suffering with Happiness?

Mention has already been made of the special role the "setting of bearings" seems to play in Nabokov's universe. This setting of bearings, it turns out, can be conceived of as a stratagem to equate the two contradictory strands of the paradox of loss: all is lost; nothing is lost. But the balance of this equation only seemed to hold out for as long as we accepted not to move outside of the realm of fiction – even if Nabokov's fictional worlds are arguably more sophisticated than their equivalents found in religious stories, Platonic myths and Homeric fields, they are still liable to suffer from the same difficulty: they only "work" for as long as we are prepared to Coleridgically suspend our disbelief. Or do they? Did we not find, in Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*, a personal account of a "sense of security" that seemed rather related to "the setting of bearings"? Are there other or similar moments in this autobiographical text that may help us to set *our* bearings, beyond the pale of the tale?

As far as I know, the Nabokovian expression of a "setting of bearings" does not occur elsewhere in his own works, or for that matter, in the English language.[581] I have assumed, judging from the context in which it is used, that its meaning is equivalent to the expression "to take one's bearings," which means "to determine one's position with regard to surrounding objects," and can be used in both a concrete physical sense and a figural sense.[582] One could deduce a "setting of bearings" to mean something like Nabokov's way of expressing a more definite way of determining one's place in the midst of an overarching whole – the neutral "setting" constituting in his eyes perhaps a more satisfactory alternative to the more egotistically connoted "taking." But Nabokov does give what sounds like an intricate elaborate description of the feeling(s) related to such a setting of bearings in his autobiography, in a passage where many of the elements seem to relate to the central fragments from *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* I have already cited. This is what he writes:

> Whenever I start thinking of my love for a person, I am in the habit of immediately drawing radii from my love—from my heart, from the tender nucleus of a personal matter—to monstrously remote points of the universe. Something impels me to measure the consciousness of my love against such unimaginable and incalculable things as the behavior of nebulae (whose very remoteness seems a form of insanity), the dreadful pitfalls of eternity, the unknowledgeable beyond the unknown, the helplessness, the cold, the sickening involutions and interpenetrations of space and time. It is a pernicious habit, but I can do nothing about it. It can be compared to the uncontrollable flick of an insomniac's tongue checking a jagged tooth in the night of his mouth and bruising itself in doing so but still persevering. I have known people who, upon accidentally touching something—a doorpost, a wall—had to go through a certain very rapid and systematic sequence of manual contacts with various surfaces in the room before returning to a balanced existence. It cannot be helped; I must know where I stand, where you and my son stand. When that slow-motion, silent explosion of love takes place in me, unfolding its melting fringes and overwhelming me with the sense of something much vaster, much more enduring and powerful than the accumulation of matter or energy in any

[581] The only possibly related exception I have been able to find is from the fourteenth century romance *Kyng Alisaunder:* "There as lay Kyng Phelipoun, / Al so he lay in slepe by nyght / Him thoughte a goshauk with gret flight / *Setlith on his beryng* / And yenith and sprad abrod his wyngyn […]." Cf. *Metrical Romances of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries, published from ancient manuscripts with an introduction, notes, and a glossary by Henry William Weber*, *Esq*. Edinburgh, 1810, volume I, p. 25 (emphasis mine). A goshauk (goshawk) is a relatively common species in the subfamily of true hawks.
[582] This is the definition given by the Oxford English Dictionary.

> imaginable cosmos, then my mind cannot but pinch itself to see if it is really awake. I have to make a rapid inventory of the universe, just as a man in a dream tries to condone the absurdity of his position by making sure he is dreaming. I have to have all space and all time participate in my emotion, in my mortal love, so that the edge of its mortality is taken off, thus helping me to fight the utter degradation, ridicule, and horror of having developed an infinity of sensation and thought within a finite existence.[583]

The necessity to "know where I stand," the "rapid inventory of the universe," and "the measure of consciousness" opposed to the "incalculable things" like "the behavior of the nebulae (whose very remoteness seem a form of insanity)" look familiar. The last opposition, I would venture, can be twinned to *Sebastian Knight*'s opposition between the "stars overhead" and "the counting of the things and souls lost on the way" – the necessary knowledge to know where one stands would be gathered from a successful setting of bearings.[584] An enigmatic undertone of assured love and quiet happiness pervades this passage from *Speak, Memory*, comparable to the one that oozed through the discussed moments in the fictional lives of Ganin, V., and William. But the question remains: if the setting of bearings is what is at the root of the state of happiness, then what does this setting of bearings consist in?

The need for a setting of bearings and a determination of one's position in and with regard to the whole seems to indicate that happiness is dependent on some sort of equation. A "counting" is one of the terms used to describe the activity related to it in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. But then: how does this "counting" of "things and souls lost on the way" relate to the *uncountability* of the "incalculable things" mentioned in *Speak, Memory*? How are we expected to equate the calculable and the incalculable? How are we to "measure our consciousness" against that which is "incalculable"? Would our consciousness not necessarily have to fall short, time and time again? No, Nabokov seems to suggest: not so long as we are able to determine where we stand. Not so long as we can still manage to make the computations that allow us to set our bearings. Not so long as we

[583] *Speak, Memory*, p. 614.
[584] Cf. also again, Aqua's suicide letter from *Ada*, where Aqua specifies that the reason for her "fall" is her *not* knowing "where I stand."

can keep the accounts in balance, by equating that which we can count with that which is incalculable.

Happiness, then, consists in the force or resilience we may draw from this equation; to be happy means: to find oneself in the midst between the countability of that which is lost, has passed, will not be, and the uncountability of the generous otherness that is still there, "the unknowledgeable beyond the unknown." Recall, at this point, Pnin, whose "liberation" from suffering consisted in a decision to take off for a place "where there is simply no saying what miracle might happen."[585] Such unexpected faith in the generosity of what is other to the self, *despite and beyond* the fragility this otherness has reduced us to before, *despite and beyond* our suffering, is one of the main points Nabokov keeps reminding us of: a resilience in the face of otherness that does not turn inward, does not come to spurn otherness and simply opposes itself to it, but, a resilience that remains open to this other. Even when the calculations have been made and it may turn out the losses vastly outnumber the wins, this negative score must still be equated with the incalculability of that which transcends calculation, with the boundless generosity of an otherness looming on the horizon. Such an equation cannot be solved: the quanta are ultimately irreconcilable and every outcome or proof we draw from it will always be hopelessly flawed. The generosity of otherness is not guaranteed, it cannot even be reasonably expected – but to set down one's bearings nonetheless, to keep seeking out our position in space and time anyway, to take up the task of what we are notwithstanding, to remain resilient beyond what breaks us and to gather the courage to create out of the debris of this brokenness something new: these are the sources and means of happiness.

Happiness is neither a "destination" nor "a way of life." The first suggestion places happiness too far from us, as a heteronomous place that is to be reached or found, outside of ourselves, beyond what and where we are. The second suggestion erroneously internalizes happiness, bringing it too close to us, implying all of us could be happy, if only we made some internal changes so as to live our lives the right way. Happiness, like the suffering it is ultimately to be equated with, has the nature of a paradox. It does not amount to "being at balance." It consists in a setting of bearings that is the result of an imbalanced

[585] Cf. chapter 3 above.

and fundamentally unbalanceable equation. This setting of bearings never occurs at the start or end of a quest, it always takes place between this beginning and this end, somewhere "along the road." To find oneself in the middle of this road and, without necessarily recalling where it began, or foreseeing where it will end, to briefly feel one knows where it is one stands in the road, and from this "knowledge" to be able to draw the faith, calm, force, courage, trust, to carry on to wherever it is one is going.

Nabokov's works do not provide us with the exact coordinates for the position where we are to set our bearings if such happiness is what we are after; but they do keep hinting at the possibility of discovering for ourselves precisely the sort of equations that may lead to deduce the coordinates for ourselves. Nabokov does not give us any certainty concerning what such an equation might look like beyond the confines of his personal imagery, but he does offer us a glance at the shape of the equation – and that may prove to be enough to induce in us the faith that our estranged relations to what is other may be restored, even when some vital element in the arrangement of the whole has been displaced. Although the displacement may cause us to waver and lose our bearings, we may nevertheless hope to find our bearings again. If the condition of possibility for being able to have a thing is being able to lose it, the consolation for being able to lose a thing is our capability for rearranging the tangle of our relations in order to arrive at some new equation where the combination of the whole makes sense again.

But here conscience and consciousness may call us to a halt. An equation? "But what," as Emily Dickinson asked, "of that?"[586] Is the pursuit of such equations even remotely enough to counter the anguish of losing ourselves in search of them? And what if

[586] Emily Dickinson, creating a dazzling outburst of despair, hope, and irony, all in one short poem, writes:
"I reason, earth is short,
And anguish absolute.
And many hurt;
But what of that?
I reason, we could die:
The best vitality
Cannot excel decay;
But what of that?
I reason that in heaven
Somehow, it will be even,
Some new equation given;
But what of that?"
(Cited from: Hollander (ed.), *American Poetry*, *op. cit.*, p. 241.)

we end up not finding the equation at all? Does all this talk of roads and bearings really provide us with a notion of happiness strong enough to reconcile ourselves to the leering pains of our losses? All these hired rabbits out of sorcerers' hats, all the glittering metaphors taken from the realm of fiction ablaze, all these old philosophers and their older ideas – do they really amount to anything more than just exotic curios scrupulously fished out of radiant texts like fishes out of the comfortable folds of their watery abodes – but don't they seem tragically dyspneal to you too?

Perhaps. But then it must be admitted that happiness itself possibly resembles most closely such fish. Prismatic explosions of iridescent life and gleaming color while freely roaming about in the water, they almost instantly lose all of their native luminosity when caught and brought on deck by eager fishermen. All too often, alas, it is only as the last cold drops of shivering color drip off in the blunt daylight of our analyses that we come to realize with a faint mixture of doubt and regret, that maybe, just maybe, this quaint fish called happiness was much livelier before we decided to reel it in on the carefully whetted fishhooks of our thoughts, which, however sharp and incisive they might initially have seemed to us, in the end only managed to violently rip apart that which we thought would constitute our most valuable catch to date. – – And at that point someone (a curious child; a wonder-wounded prince, perchance) steps in the boat or on the page and asks us the question we fear most: "I can see the fish, clearly – but where did all the colors go?" To wonder on, or to wander off? I hurriedly reach for my books again and start rummaging through the pages. I know the answer must be somewhere.

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Index of references to philosophers in Nabokov's works

Two "indexes" are presented here. The first provides a list of the philosophers mentioned in Nabokov's novels, his autobiography, the interviews bundled in *Strong Opinions,* and his *Lectures* as edited and published by Fredson Bowers. The second index lists these philosophers alphabetically, and states where in Nabokov's works they are cited or referred to. Fictional and invented philosophers (Pierre Delalande, Adam Krug, Van Veen, etc.) have not been included in the list. Page numbers of the translations from Russian novels refer to the Penguin Modern Classics Series. Page number references to the Anglophone novels are to the three volume Library of America edition overseen by Brian Boyd. For the sake of completion and to take into account the contents of the sixth chapter of this thesis, references to Proust, although strictly no "philosopher," have also been incorporated.

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Samenvatting

Het proefschrift *Nabokov in Conversation: A Philosophico-Critical Exploration of the Moral Dimension of His American Works* tracht inzicht te verschaffen in verscheidene ethische thema's verbonden met het werk van de Amerikaans-Russische auteur Vladimir Nabokov. Door de disciplines van de letterkundige analyse en de wijsgerige reflectie met elkaar te laten converseren probeert het proefschrift een bijdrage te leveren aan de discussie over enkele klassieke morele vraagstukken en problemen uit de filosofische traditie. Hieronder volgt een hoofdstuksgewijze samenvatting van die vraagstukken, en de manier waarop zij behandeld worden.

Het eerste hoofdstuk geeft een korte situering van de wijsgerige ethiek en bespreekt op welke wijze voorgaande literatuuronderzoekers het oeuvre van Nabokov in relatie hebben gebracht met kwesties en vragen rondom moraliteit. Vervolgens wordt de benadering van het huidige proefschrift aangekondigd. Deze benadering is comparatief, maar richt zich uiteindelijk niet in hoofdzaak op het opsporen van "invloeden". Veeleer wordt op zoek gegaan naar het opzetten van enkele "conversaties" tussen werken en auteurs. Het beoogde resultaat van deze conversaties, waarin zowel de stemmen van de wijsgeer als de literator doorklinken, is een verdieping van onze inzichten in zowel de verschillende wijsgerige problematieken als de respectievelijke werken van Nabokov.

De eerste problematiek die op die wijze besproken wordt is die van het lijden (*suffering*). Door middel van een hermeneutische analyse van Nabokovs *Bend Sinister* wordt de dialectische benaderingen van het fenomeen van het lijden geproblematiseerd. Daarbij is de aandacht in eerste instantie gericht op de werken van G.W.F. Hegel en vroege kritieken daarop door zijn tijdgenoot W.T. Krug. In latere instantie worden ook werken van contemporaine dialectici zoals Charles Taylor en William Desmond besproken, in een poging te achterhalen of deze aangescherpte vormen van de dialectische sociale filosofie (Taylor) en dialectische metafysica (Desmond) ons een vorm van wijsgerige reflectie bieden die daadwerkelijk recht doet aan de ervaring van het lijden zelf.

In hoofdstuk drie wordt deze reflectie voortgezet met kritiek op de dialectische filosofie uit een andere hoek: die van het pragmatisme van William James en het

neopragmatisme van Richard Rorty. In de loop van het tweede hoofdstuk zal echter blijken dat ook de pragmatistische benadering van het fenomeen van het lijden en de ethiek waarmee denkers als Rorty en literatuurwetenschappers als Brian Boyd dit fenomeen trachten te adresseren problematisch is. De tekstuele focus van het hoofdstuk ligt op het Nabokoviaanse personage Pnin, en zijn rol in de gelijknamige tekst *Pnin*. Getracht wordt te laten zien dat het misfortuin dat hem ten deel valt de categorieën van het komische en het tragische ontstijgt. Het lijden van Pnin, zo wordt uiteindelijk beargumenteerd, geeft ons inzicht in een aspect van het lijden dat de "idiotie" van het lijden kan worden genoemd: een term die zinspeelt op de fundamentele ondeelbaarheid van de ervaring van het lijden, en over de "absurde" eenzaamheid waarop het lijden ons terugwerpt.

In het vierde hoofdstuk staat het tragische verhaal van Hugh Person, het hoofdpersonage uit Nabokovs *Transparent Things*, centraal. Gepoogd wordt om het bijzondere en zeer specifieke gebruik van het concept "transparantie" in deze tekst terug te leiden tot de metafysica van twee denkers: Henri Bergson en George Berkeley. Nadat kort wordt getoond hoe de gedachten van laatstgenoemden aan elkaar verwant zijn, moet een analyse van de tragedie van Hugh Person uitwijzen wat de morele consequenties van zijn zeer specifieke metafysische conceptie van spatialiteit zijn.

Hoofdstuk vijf borduurt verder voort op deze link tussen metafysica en ethiek. Daar waar in het voorgaande hoofdstuk het concept van de ruimtelijkheid in relatie tot het ethische werd besproken, wordt nu gekeken naar het concept van de tijd. De opzet is hier om de rol van het concept "tijd" in zowel de praktische als theoretische filosofie van Immanuel Kant te bespreken en om door middel van een analyse van de dimensie van de tijdelijkheid in Nabokovs roman *Ada* de spanning die in Kants ethiek heerst tussen de rigiditeit van de categorische imperatief enerzijds en de dialectische fragiliteit van het menselijk subject anderzijds, te thematiseren en te problematiseren. Het hoofdstuk eindigt met de suggestie dat deze spanning wellicht deels opgeheven zou kunnen worden door een herintroductie van een dimensie van de tijdelijkheid in de vorm van de notie van een concrete toekomstigheid van de handeling. Voorgesteld wordt dat Kant dit zelf had kunnen doen door in zijn praktische filosofie meer aandacht te besteden aan de notie van tijd zoals gedefinieerd in zijn theoretische filosofie, dat is, als een zuivere a priori intuïtie.

Daar waar hoofdstuk vijf in zijn bespreking van de relatie tussen ethiek en tijd focust op tijd als toekomstigheid, zet hoofdstuk zes deze reflectie voort met betrekking tot die andere belangrijke dimensie van de tijd, te weten het verleden. De conversatie van dit hoofdstuk is er een die hoofdzakelijk gekarakteriseerd wordt door een uitwisseling tussen Nabokovs *Lolita* en Marcel Prousts *À la recherche du temps perdu*. De vraag die als een rode draad door deze uitwisseling loopt, en voortdurend opnieuw wordt opgepakt in de conversatie, is de vraag naar de mogelijkheidsvoorwaarden van een succesvolle reconciliatie met het verleden. Meer concreet wordt daarbij gekeken naar de twee hoofdpersonages uit de hier besproken romanteksten: Prousts "verteller" en Nabokovs Humbert Humbert. Wat maakt dat Humbert Humberts verhaal is geworden tot het verhaal van een morele mislukking, en dat van Prousts verteller tot het verhaal van een artistiek succes, terwijl op feitelijk niveau beide gevallen zoveel met elkaar gemeen lijken te hebben? Het hoofdstuk sluit af met een bespreking van de mate waarin de noties van identiteit en tijdelijkheid met elkaar verweven zijn.

Hoofdstuk zeven handelt vervolgens over de problematiek van de identiteit. Centraal staat de spanningsverhouding tussen het concept van identiteit en de vocabulaires rondom thema's als creativiteit, autonomie en zelfbepaling. Met het doel een conversatie op te zetten die meer inzicht verschaft in de manier waarop deze concepten zich tot elkaar verhouden, wordt Nabokovs *Pale Fire* besproken in de context van enkele van de werken van Friedrich Nietzsche. Daarbij wordt vooral gekeken naar een opmerkelijke dynamiek die de creatieve handeling teweegbrengt in het subject: een dynamiek die omschreven wordt als de dynamiek van de *Aufgabe*, en waarbij de identiteit van het subject voortdurend onderhevig is aan de eis van de "opgave" (*Aufgabe*) van dat wat geschapen moet worden, en de fragiliteit van dat wat "opgegeven" (*aufgegeben*) dient te worden om deze opgave (*Aufgabe*) te realiseren.

In het achtste en laatste hoofdstuk wordt gereflecteerd op de thematiek van het geluk. Na terug te hebben gekeken op de thema's rondom het lijden en het verlies die de conversatie rondom Nabokovs werken op gang brachten, worden in dit laatste hoofdstuk, dat uitdrukkelijk geen afsluiting is, de originele vragen en verwonderingen die ten grondslag lagen aan de eerste twee hoofdstukken nogmaals opgepakt, teneinde na te

denken over de relatie tussen geluk (*happiness*), lijden (*suffering*) en verlies (*loss*). De tekst van Nabokov waardoor de reflectie zich in dit hoofdstuk laat leiden is *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. Na de vraag te hebben gesteld naar de verhouding tussen verlies, geluk en lijden, en te hebben gereflecteerd op de mogelijkheid voor een equatie van geluk en lijden, wordt het proefschrift afgesloten met een hernieuwd beroep op de verwondering, waartoe zowel de filosoof als de literatuurwetenschapper zich veroordeeld weten.

Curriculum Vitae

De auteur van dit proefschrift is Roy Groen. Geboren op 14 september 1987 in Leiden. Begon achtien jaar later, in 2005, aan de studie Romaanse Talen en Culturen in Nijmegen en studeerde in 2008 *cum laude* af met een BA-scriptie over de recente geschiedenis van de literaire kritiek in Frankrijk. Bracht tijdens die studie een semester door aan de Université de Lausanne in Zwitersland. Deed tussen 2006 en 2008 ook zijn eerste academische poging filosoof te worden, maar werd verleid door het grote boek van de wereld, en vertrok op wereldreis. Keerde in 2009 terug naar de Nijmeegse academie, en nam daar vanaf 2009 deel aan de Onderzoeksmaster *Literary Studies*. Verbleef in 2010-2011 voor een semester aan de Université de Paris X in Frankrijk. Rondde zijn studie in 2011 *cum laude* af met een onderzoeksscriptie over het concept van de tijd in de werken van Vladimir Nabokov en Marcel Proust. Deed in het academisch jaar 2011-2012 een tweede poging filosoof te worden, en begon aan de masteropleiding Wijsbegeerte aan de Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. Probeerde het weer, faalde weer, maar faalde beter – want vertrok halverwege wederom naar Nijmegen om van 2012 tot 2016 te werken aan het proefschrift dat u zojuist (wellicht) gelezen heeft. Was in het najaar van 2014 van september tot december verbonden aan Princeton University (New Jersey) als *Visiting Student Research Collaborator*. Hoopt zich na de verdediging van dit proefschrift met recht een man van de letteren te mogen noemen.